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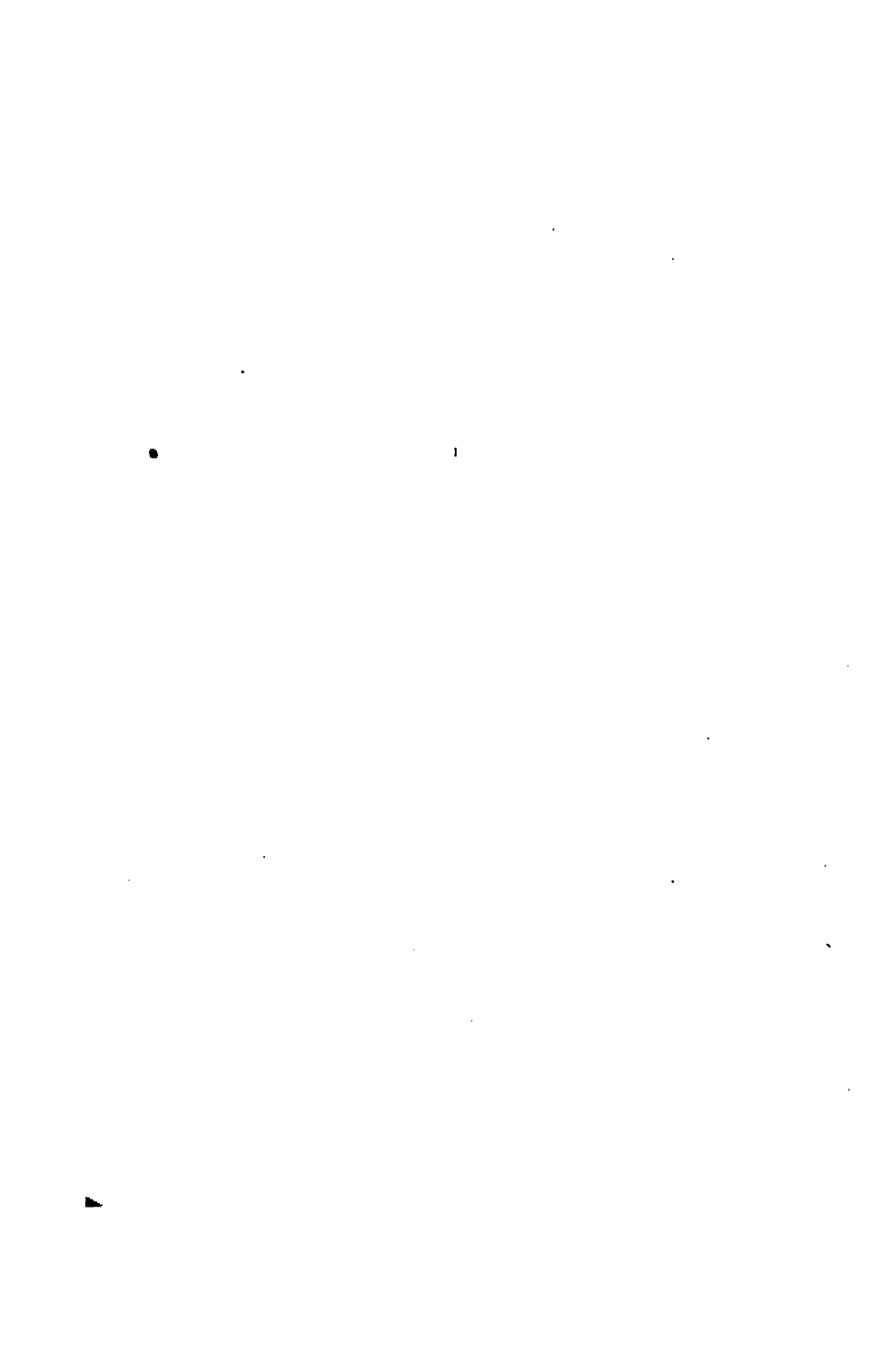
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HIDING-PLACES

ALLEN FRENCH



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Green



THE HIDING-PLACES

THE HIDING-PLACES

A NOVEL

BY
ALLEN FRENCH
✓

L.C.

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1917

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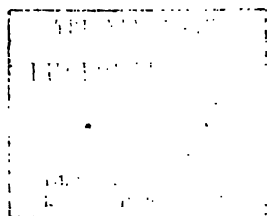
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THE HIDING-PLACES

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THE HIDING-PLACES

CHAPTER I

"WHY, Binney!" cried Gertrude, "what is the matter?"

She and Margery and I had been sitting on the wide stone wall that runs above the South Farm's lower mowing. It is a very old wall, with its original central portion buttressed and widened by the stone ploughed out of the adjoining fields. Sitting on one side of it, with the girls on the other, while we were chatting I had carelessly pried up a broad flat stone that lay in the middle, between us three. Then, almost grown man as I was, my heart began to beat wildly, I panted for breath, and I felt my eyes straining at my find. For there, in a little cavity carefully made beneath the stone, lay the Flat Oblong Box.

It could be nothing else. The Thick Oblong had been found in 1839, the Flat Oval in '47, the Flat Round in '54. There were left the Cubical, the Thick Oval, the Flat Oblong—and beyond a doubt I had found the latter.

It was flat, scarcely more than an inch in thickness. It was oblong, about four inches by eight. Its dull lead had no gleam or glint whatever, but

I felt that I could look within it, and could see the flash of diamonds, the glow of rubies. Though the sweat started out on my forehead, I was not hot. I was cold all over.

The girls must have been watching me as I stared down into the wall. Gertrude repeated her question. With an instinctive attempt to answer, I found that my lips were dry, and I began with difficulty to moisten them. Then Margery laid her hand upon my arm.

"Binney," she asked, "are you ill?"

God forgive me! When I thought of her it was with alarm; when I looked at her it was with suspicion. And her sensitive, sweet face first flushed and then paled as she drew away from me.

"Why, Binney!" she gasped.

Gertrude suddenly looked down into the wall. "Why, look here! He's found—" Her hand went out.

I seized her wrist, and drew her jewelled hand away. Though she cried out upon me, I held her until with my other hand—trying vainly to cover the box with my palm and fingers—I had taken out the treasure and stuffed it into my pocket.

"You are rough!" cried Gertrude indignantly. "You hurt me. And your hand is cold as ice!" She began rubbing her wrist.

"I beg your pardon, Gertrude," I said. But my real attention was on Margery, and Margery had seen. Her eyes grew big with astonishment, and then her face flushed again.



"The Flat Oblong!" She scarcely breathed the words, but I heard them.

"Well," I demanded with hardihood, "what of it?"

"It's—it's years," she gasped, "since the last was found."

"Forty years last March," I said. "Seventy years since this was put here." I was willing to show my knowledge, but I was watching Margery carefully.

Gertrude had been prying down into the wall. "The sweetest little chamber!" she cried. "Like a tiny dome. Binney just lifted the cupola off, and there it was!"

I inspected the cavity. It had been made with care, of small stones fitted neatly together. Nothing more was inside, except a little leaf-mould in the corners. And there for seventy years, with but a loose flat stone to keep it safe, had lain the leaden box!

Our visitor began again to rub her wrist. "I don't see that it's yours," she complained. "We're on her father's land."

"Makes no difference," I asserted curtly. "In these cases findings are havings."

"What do you mean by these cases?" she demanded. "Are cigarette-boxes hidden all over the farm?"

Cigarette-boxes! "I tell you," I scoffed, "it's been there at least since 1824. A tin box would rust away in five years."

Gertrude, her eyes suddenly snapping with ex-

citement, sat upright and looked at me. "It's the family mystery!" she cried. "The pirate hoard! The diamonds!" She looked from me to my cousin, and read confirmation in Margery's face. Swiftly turning to me again, she began to beg: "Oh, show it to me!"

But a sound took away my interest in Gertrude's soft eyes and her pretty mouth. I heard the tramp of approaching horses, of the big pair that belonged to my cousin Lon, Margery's father. In a moment he would be resting them close by, at the top of the rise. I heard the rare sound of his harsh voice, encouraging the horses; in imagination I saw the pale face above the sparse black beard, and the gray eyes whose meaning, since first I began to puzzle about them in my childhood, I had never been able to read. I realized that I did not wish to meet him. Then I wondered how to get away.

I was on Cousin Lon's land with a vengeance; it was at least two hundred yards to the boundary, with a thick belt of scrub woodland to cross. How could I be sure that he would respect the old buccaneer's will? If he did not, how could I resist him? I had considerable conceit in my own strength; but Cousin Lon, in spite of his unhealthy pallor, was the strongest man in Petersham.

I felt a little tremor as, for the first time in my life, I knew what it was to meet a possible enemy. A word from Margery, and Cousin Lon would know. I looked at her while, with a hand carefully

guarding my pocket, I got down from the wall and stood at the edge of the farm road. Margery did not need to be told what I was thinking. I saw her lip quiver.

"Well," I remarked, as carelessly as I could, "I must be going." I saw the horses' heads nodding up the rise.

Gertrude sprang from the wall in disgust. "Aren't you going to show it to me?"

"To-morrow, perhaps," I answered, as easily as I could. I was too proud to cut and run, but how I wanted to! I edged into the road.

Cousin Lon and his horses were close at hand. "Whoa!" he called, stopping them. "Thar—and a good haul, too!" Over their drooping heads, as he sat on the wagon seat, he looked at us good-naturedly.

It was not Margery that spoke to him, but Gertrude. She pointed at me. "He's found a box in the wall."

Cousin Lon's relaxed body stiffened. He did not speak, but glared at me.

"An oblong box," supplemented Gertrude.

I could hear my cousin gasp. "The Flat Oblong!" Suddenly he cast the reins on the horses' backs, and stood up.

I had always been in awe of Cousin Lon, and habit was too strong. I found myself backing across the road and faltering out his name. Though I made an effort to recover my dignity, it was fruitless. He leaped from the wagon—and I scooted.

For a moment a boyish fright almost mastered me, yet I found a little self-possession. I knew where to go, and I knew that I could run. In three strides I was in the scrub. Then, though I heard him crashing behind me, and harshly calling, I set my suppler body to the task of avoiding the trees, and in no time left him well behind.

CHAPTER II

WHEN I had crossed our wall and, listening, knew that I had distanced Cousin Lon, I dropped into a sullen walk. I was twenty, and I had run away! Moreover, Gertrude had seen me. Before Margery I had as yet no shame in showing my true meanness; but this comparative stranger, this pretty girl from the city, I wanted to stand well with. Gertrude's daintiness had roused my ambition. When she rode to the Hill to see us, as since her first uninvited coming she had done half a dozen times, she had both made me feel my clumsiness and roused in me a desire to rise. Looking always out upon the world with curiosity, I saw in Gertrude a type of what its men struggled for. I had known that I was not entirely unconcerned in the struggle, had felt that if ever I was to emerge from the farm, it must be soon. Not that I wanted Gertrude for myself, at least not yet. But I wanted to watch her, to know her better than this broken acquaintance had permitted me to do. Of course, I wanted her to think well of me—and before her eyes I had run away!

Reaching the spring, I threw myself down on the rock by its side, and raged at myself. It wasn't a mere indiscretion that I had committed: I had

betrayed my own manhood. Then a sound caused me a fierce joy in the hope of retrieving myself.

I heard the thunder of hoofs. A horse was galloping, and I had not a doubt that Cousin Lon had unhitched one of his pair, and was hurrying to intercept me. I took three strides into the middle of our farm track, and waited. He should see that I was not afraid of him. The horse came dashing around the bend not fifty yards away, and I saw that my pursuer was Gertrude.

She was storming after me, intent on the pursuit. Her supple poise and her eager, snapping eyes made her wonderfully attractive. Gertrude was but nineteen, with every advantage that her youth could give to an intense, wilful spirit. Her cheeks were red, her white teeth gleamed, and the rush of her joyous, masterful presence quite blew away all my pugnacity. When she stopped her horse and looked down at me she was laughing.

"Safely away!" she cried.

Reminded, I frowned. "Where is he?"

"He gave it up," she answered. "In a minute he came back, and such angry looks! Why does he talk so little? He makes me uncomfortable, and so I came away."

She looked around her, first in front at the great shape of the double pine rising above the woods, then down at the spring. These were the two beauties of our farm, the latter all our own and private, the former a landmark known for miles.

"Why Binney," she said, pointing down at the

spring, and speaking in a quiet little voice, "this is where I first met you!"

Yes. From opposite sides of the pool we had stared at each other in the surprise of that discovery. I had knelt to drink of the water, when into my mirrored vision glided the figure of this girl, like that of a hamadryad of the wood. Reflected in the quiet water, she had seemed mysterious and unreal; but when I raised my head the lovely truth was there. And we had looked, absorbed, until suddenly Gertrude's blush roused my own. I had felt it burning from my neck to my forehead.

Now I blushed at my next recollection. Gertrude smiled mischievously. "And you asked me, do you remember, what I was doing there?"

"Gertrude," I pleaded, "I was taken by surprise. I didn't mean it to sound as badly as that."

"You were quite right," she told me. "You were guarding your treasure—and, after all, it was a real one."

Then she slipped her knee loose from her saddle, dropped the reins, and held out her hands to me. Skilled by her training, I lifted her down. The horse, left free, at once began cropping the bushes. Gertrude came very close. Her head she cocked at me like a bright bird; her hand she put on my sleeve. "Binney," she said in the most winsome voice, "I want you to tell me all the old story."

She radiated comradeship, and her voice thrilled low with it. No one could resist Gertrude in that mood. Every bit of surliness fell away from me.

Eagerly I led her down to the rock, and we sat by the spring side by side.

"You know," I began, "that these two farms are called Diamond Hill, and every field of them is posted against trespass." She knew. The headstrong desire to know what lay within the forbidden precincts had first led her to invade our solitude. Her smile drew mine; then I went on: "It's been so for three generations. We keep the trespass signs in repair, if we let everything else go to ruin."

"It all goes back to the old buccaneer," cried Gertrude, moving excitedly. "Tell me about him, Binney."

"He came home after the War of 1812," I told her. "The two farms were one place then, and had belonged to his brother, who was dead. The two sons were boys, the mother was sickly, and there was no order and no money. He bought the farm—it's remarkable how many sea-captains have settled in the towns roundabout—and lived here with the family. He put a lot of money into repairing and rebuilding: all these wonderful stone walls—they say he loved to have them built. When the older nephew married, the uncle built for him the house that Cousin Lon now lives in. And when the old pirate died, in 1824, he divided the land and the money between the brothers."

"His money, yes," agreed Gertrude. "But the treasure?"

"You know the story as well as I," I reproached her.

"I know only what they tell in the village," she answered. "But you all, even Margery, are so close-mouthed."

It was, as a matter of fact, the first time that I had ever told the story to any one. But my new, warm glow of possession, now just beginning to steal over me, and doubtless Gertrude's winsomeness, loosened my tongue. "He had a lot of precious stones——"

"Was he really a pirate?" interrupted Gertrude.

"Pirate, buccaneer, privateer—nobody knew."

"And the stones were diamonds?" asked Gertrude.

"Mostly. But there were rubies and emeralds also. Maybe other kinds. Only they were very high-grade stones." It sounded as if we were discussing fertilizers. "Nobody knew he had them, for he never showed them. But his will told of them."

"And then people hunted everywhere?"

"No," I answered. "Nobody understood their value, and so no search was made. It was fourteen years before my great-grandfather found the Thick Oblong. He ploughed it out of the north meadow, and even though the ploughshare ripped the box open he didn't realize what he had till his wife remembered the will and sent for a jeweller. None of us ever crosses the north meadow without studying the ground for shiny stones. My great-grandfather went back and picked up half a dozen."

"And they were valuable?" demanded Gertrude.

"Very," I answered with the largeness of ignorance.

Gertrude commented shrewdly. "I don't see that either of your families is very rich."

"Well," I admitted, somewhat abashed, "we've never been able to keep what we've got, and that's a fact. At any rate, after that first find both the farms were posted with signs. We don't like strangers on our lands."

"But you don't keep each other off."

"That," I explained, "was a condition of the old fellow's will. We may go where we please on each other's lands, and findings are havings, no matter which of us gets them."

"There were other finds?" Gertrude pursued.

I told her of the other two finds in the next fifteen years, the old knowledge that there were three more boxes to be found. Then Gertrude seized my arm.

"Binney," she wheedled, "let me see it."

I was itching to have the box in my hands. "Very well," I agreed. "But don't touch!" And I drew the box out of my pocket.

It had been roughly shaped out of thick sheet lead, and was heavy to hold. I saw the hammer-marks, doubtless the handiwork of the old buccaneer. Crude but effective soldering held the lapped edges. And the strange thing lay in my hands colorless, lifeless, forbidding. The patina of its seventy years' hiding invested it with a sinis-

ter stoniness. With my imagination excited, I felt a little dread of what this thing might mean to me. Then I saw Gertrude's little hand stealing toward the box.

Very firmly, with a boy's whole-hearted selfishness, I put her hand away. "Gertrude," I said severely, "this is not for you."

"Open it!" she begged. "Cut open a corner, and let's see what's inside."

But the old family secretiveness was reasserting itself. "Open it here?" I scoffed. "If we dropped a diamond in these leaves or in the spring we'd never find it."

"In the road," she suggested. I shook my head. "Rattle it, then," she directed. "Let's hear the sound of diamonds knocking against rubies!"

Standing up, I shook the box, but could hear nothing, and told her so. "Let me listen, selfish!" And seizing my wrist, she shook the box close to her ear. But her eager face fell.

"I don't believe," she cried, "that there's anything in it!"

"Aha!" said I wisely, and pocketed the box.

She caught at my jacket. "Pig!"

But with entire indifference, making no allowance for natural feminine weakness, I twitched my coat away, and frowned down at her. "Gertrude," I notified her, "you don't belong in this at all."

"But I must see them!" she exclaimed.

"Come around to-morrow, then," I answered indifferently.

"Oh, very well!" she said, tossing her head. Then with a sudden change of manner: "Aren't you going to help me on my horse?"

I caught the beast for her, held her foot, and lifted her into the saddle. She was not very light—in spite of the poets, no healthy girl is—but I was proud of my strength. When she was safely in the saddle, and I was gathering her reins for her, she said softly: "Binney, you really will show me?"

I looked up. Gertrude wore her most dazzling smile. She knew its effect, and I—I felt it. "Of course I'll show you," I promised and, quite forgetting my box, watched her out of sight.

CHAPTER III

No sooner was Gertrude gone than I thought of my parents and hurried home. As I went my feeling of good fortune, the glow of possession, grew until, when I reached the barnyard, I was ready to shout with exultation. My good father, who had indulgently allowed me to leave my chores, and now was doing them for me, was coming from the barn with two brimming pails of milk. I rushed at him.

"Guess what I've got!"

"Easy, boy," he warned me.

But I thumped him on the chest. "Who cares for milk?" I demanded. And drawing out my prize, I held it under his nose.

It was so close to him that he wrinkled his forehead and drew away in order to see it. And then—down fell the milk! One pail, after splashing a jet high up on his trousers, remained upright; the other spilled its gushing contents over our boots. But father, heedless, seized the box.

"The Flat Oblong!" he gasped. He said no more, but turned the box over and over in his hands.

My mother came running from the house. "The milk!" she cried, and hastily set upright the spilled pail. But there wasn't a gill left in it. "Whatever has come over you?" she demanded.

As a rejoinder my father put the box into her hands. The first sight of it stopped her reproaches. She looked from one of us to the other.

"It can't be—real," she stammered.

"But, mother," I protested, "I found it in Cousin Lon's wall."

"That's it," she asserted. "He's trying to fool us." Her frightened eyes still scanned us both.

I was not quick enough to think of a good answer, and her fear infected me. As for father, he was fairly seized with panic, and stuttered without saying a word. Then I whipped out my jack-knife, opened it, and offered it to him. He received it with shaking hands, took the box from mother, and at the first attempt to cut the lead, gashed his finger. I took both knife and box and, while we all stood in the puddle of milk, began to cut.

So hard was the crust of the lead that it turned the blade, and the first thrust nearly wounded me. But I tried again and again until I had made an opening, where the bright edges of shining metal rewarded me. Hacking eagerly, rapidly dropping down the little bright shavings, I cut away at a corner until I had a respectable section of it nearly severed. Then in my haste I dropped the knife, bent the piece once back and forth, and fairly tore it away.

My mother held out her two hands like a cup, and I tilted the box over them. Out rolled a downy, yellowish ball, and another and another, cascading down until the hands were heaping full. We two

males groaned in dismay. These were not stones. But my mother, looking close, cried, "Sewed in buckskin!" and scurried for the house and her scissors.

We came upon her in the kitchen, where she had dumped her handful on the table and was already at work, cutting open the first ball that she had again snatched up. Leaning close, I saw that it—a little lump about the bigness of a large marble—was indeed made of some dingy yellow undressed leather, caught together by neat stitches of unwaxed cobbler's thread. It was at these that mother was working. In a moment they yielded; she unrolled the leather, and displayed on her palm a little object, scarcely bigger than a big pea. It was angular and dimly white, like a worn bit of quartz.

We three looked at it and felt our fear was justified. This a diamond, or a ruby? Merely such a stone as could be picked up anywhere. My mother laughed harshly.

"And that good pail of milk!"

"Dern it!" growled father, taking the stone and looking at it. "Can it be—anything? Doesn't feel—" He passed it to me.

It felt soapy, almost greasy. It wasn't like any stone I ever saw. With some difficulty I opened my dry lips. "Open another."

Mother took a little larger ball and quickly was unrolling its skin cover. She held her hand in the light from the window, and the deep red gleam from

the stone in her palm caused us to cry out in delight.

The shining thing was cut with many glittering facets.

Then the gleam dimmed as the light from the window was cut off. Mother closed her hand with a start, father clapped his hat upon the little heap of buckskin balls, and we all looked at the window. A man was peering in.

"Hi!" he called impatiently. "Where are you all, anyway?"

He rapped sharply, and I recognized him more by his manner than by anything that I could see of him, for his face was in heavy shadow. It was Mr. Worthen, banker, broker, Gertrude's father. Then behind him I saw a horse, two horses, and Gertrude on one of them. She had met her father and brought him with her.

Father went to the door and threw it open. "In here, sir," he responded.

My good father never had any dignity or force. Here was this stranger demanding entrance, and because he had a hearty way with him, an air of command, and social prestige—which we country folk recognized rather as knowledge of the world—my father was ready at once to admit him to this private matter of ours. But mother frowned, and in response to her gesture I swept all the gems into father's hat, and thence transferred them to my pocket. The leaden box lay neglected on the table.

"Yes, sir," father was saying at the door. His tone was bright and eager, quite as much like a boy's as ever was my own. "Yes, sir, another find. I think they're jewels. Won't you come and see?"

Mother wagged her head at me in resignation as Mr. Worthen, with Gertrude following, came into the room. As for me, I sulked. I resented the intrusion—and I hated to have Gertrude come into our dingy kitchen. For our family of three did everything about our place: we were plasterers, painters, carpenters, farmers. No man ever came there to work for us, no woman to help about the house. What we could not find time to do simply remained undone. And so the kitchen plaster was black with the smoke of a generation; no scrubbing of mother's could get it clean. It was waiting till we men-folk could get time to paint, and to refinish the ceiling. Gertrude's bright presence made the room seem dark, and I made a vow which remained unfulfilled—oh, for so many months!

She saw my surliness, and made up to me at once. "You need father," she said. "You'll get cheated if he doesn't help you. Isn't it lucky I found him?"

A wonderful girl, Gertrude. Of course, to such a country boy as I a city girl would be a marvel; but this lass had not only beauty and daintiness, and an experience far wider than my own, but also the knowledge of the way to use all these in gaining her point. Nor did I fail to recognize her kindness in taking trouble with me, who twice within the

hour had been rude to her. In just a moment we were smiling together.

Then she saw the box on the table and snatched it up; but in the moment of exultation her face fell. "You've emptied it!"

"Where are the stones, Hartwell?" asked her father briskly.

My father looked about him. "There were a whitish and a reddish one."

Mother produced them both. We had all given way: there was some sense, indeed perhaps there was wisdom, in consulting with Mr. Worthen. For what did such folk as we know of diamonds and rubies? In a minute the little heap was once more upon the table; and we three sat anxiously, Gertrude (with our first ruby in her hand) sat excitedly watching the banker while, with inscrutable face, he cut open each little ball.

There were thirty of them, and I think his features never twitched while, going from the smallest to the largest, he examined them one by one. Some were like the first we had found, dull, unpromising things. But most were far different, being cut gems that sparkled or glowed marvellously. Nine were red, one green, one deep blue. The rest were colorless, except for a faint tone of yellow that suggested a distantly human warmth, or of blue that gave them the uncanniness of the devil. Mr. Worthen at last laid them all out before him in a square and regarded them, balancing back on his chair.

My father ventured to speak. "Are they worth anything, sir?"

Mr. Worthen nodded slowly, his eyes still on the stones. "I know something about these things; I buy them occasionally." I thought of the jewels which Gertrude, girl though she was, wore on her fingers, and made my first acquaintance with this strange passion.

"Well?" asked father tremulously.

"Thirty of them," counted Mr. Worthen. He looked at father with a sudden emphatic gleam. "I should say they'd average a thousand apiece."

CHAPTER IV

WE three sat perfectly still and looked at each other. Thirty thousand dollars. Thirty thousand dollars! My brain was jarred. Father looked at mother with his mouth wide open; and mother, returning his look, was slowly flushing a deep red.

Gertrude broke out excitedly. "Oh, how fine! And now Binney can get new riding things, and you can—" She looked around her at the dingy room, her thought plainly written on her face, but, suddenly recollecting her training, stopped.

"Here," said Mr. Worthen to me. "Roll up these things and pack them in the box again."

"Let me help," begged Gertrude. We fell to work. Gertrude caused delay by insisting on handling each stone, weighing it, feeling it, looking at it in various lights. She was constantly exclaiming at their beauty. As for me, I felt a strong but different pleasure. The strange feel of the uncut diamond I shall never forget. And that I could hold in my hand a thousand, two thousand, six, eight thousand dollars—it was intoxicating!

I was recalled to the others by hearing a question by Mr. Worthen. "There's never been any further division of the farms?"

"Never since they were first set apart by my great-granduncle," answered my father. "You

see, for three generations there's been only one child in each family. And except for Margery, always sons."

"Your family arrangements would have gone to smash if ever one of the farms had been divided," remarked Mr. Worthen. "Especially if one of the heirs sold out his share to a stranger. You'd be warning each other off the farms."

But father met him there. "Oh, no, we shouldn't. For if you close your farm against your neighbor, he closes his against you. And then where are your chances? Human natur' couldn't stand it. Supposing that boy hadn't been on Lon's land to-day!"

"I was coming to that," answered Mr. Worthen. "Why aren't these stones Lon Hartwell's? Oh, I know all about the conditions of the will, but were they—are they—legal? Can't your cousin sue and get the stones?"

"No," returned father confidently. "For then I could sue him for the value of the stones in the Flat Round which his grandfather found on my side of the fence."

"Forty years back!" objected Mr. Worthen. But he said no more and sat thinking. I had been tying up the box in brown paper, a clumsy, undignified parcel. Yet thirty thousand dollars!

"Well," demanded Mr. Worthen suddenly, "what are you going to do with them?"

We three were puzzled, and again we looked at one another. I think Gertrude opened her mouth

to speak; indeed she must have, for her father repressed her.

“Gertrude, be quiet!”

In my father’s face I saw bewilderment, in my mother’s something of alarm. All this property in gems, here in a New England farmhouse, eighty miles from Boston and two hundred from New York, the nearest markets for such merchandise. What could we country folk do? What value were they to us at all?

Mr. Worthen rose and went to the stove, to which he turned his back as to a fireplace, straddling oracularly. “Hartwell, if you should take those stones down to the city, you’d be a child in the hands of the jewellers.”

My father nodded his assent. The very thought of the city alarmed him, as I well knew.

“Up here the things are in danger,” Mr. Worthen pointed out. “They could easily be stolen. They would be ruined if your house burns. You ought to get them into safety.”

He stood and watched us while we worried over the situation. I was impressed by his insight and much burdened by his solid figure while he stood and waited for us to decide. His bald crown nodded positively toward us; his side-whiskers bristled confidence; his small eye gleamed dogmatically; and his firm mouth showed that he was right.

Opposite him my father puzzled apprehensively. The soft hair was all awry; the chestnut beard was tremulous with the uncertain movements of his

mouth. Uneasily he glanced from mother to Mr. Worthen.

"I'll tell you what," said the banker suddenly. "I'm going down to Boston to-morrow. I know where your stuff ought to be sold. If you say so, I'll dispose of it for you."

I felt relief. The keeping of a mere leaden box had seemed a simple matter; but now that the box had disgorged gems of such a price, the responsibility seemed greater than all of us could bear. But what were thirty thousand dollars to Mr. Worthen? I was glad that he had come.

"Of course I can guarantee nothing," he objected to father's confused thanks. "If I lose them, or if I'm wrong about the valuation—it may be only twenty thousand for the lot—why, I can't be responsible. But I can do better with them for you than you can do for yourself."

My father, very willingly and thankfully, took the box and put it in his hands.

The state of mind into which the new prospect put us was, at least for my father and me, indescribably elated. Out in the barnyard, when I went to fetch the horses, I found Gertrude's mare just finishing the milk, while my dog Jones sat by and licked his whiskers. All I could do was to laugh; and the best that I could think of when I had put Gertrude on her horse, was to tell her of it, and grin absurdly. At the same time my father, with a slightly fatuous expression, was listening to Mr. Worthen's warnings.

"Now don't talk of this, Hartwell. Just keep your own counsel, answer no questions, and warn people off the place as usual. If it all gets out, you'll have treasure-seekers here by the dozen."

As for our secret, it was already spreading; for, though we did not know it, Gertrude had told her father the news in the presence of others. But father earnestly promised to keep off all comers. Then the beginning of a smile corrupted his seriousness.

Mr. Worthen leaned and slapped him on the shoulder. "Goes to the head, doesn't it? I remember the same when I made my first big hit."

He and Gertrude trotted away, down our stony roadway, where the rain had gullied the track into something like the dried bed of a brook. Gertrude flashed at me a last smile as they turned the corner; the clatter died away. Then father and I were able to grin at each other openly.

It was mother who could not rise to the height of our bliss. She discovered the empty pail, chased away the complacent dog, and mourned.

"No milk till to-morrow!"

"Rejoice, woman!" cried my father. "What is a pail of milk to us now? Aren't we rich?"

"Rich!" scoffed my mother. "And I cannot make bread to-night!" She turned her back and went into the house.

I, who knew her better, I sometimes think, than ever did my father, divined that she was concealing the conflict of her feelings. But my father was of a different mind.

"Isn't that like a woman?" he demanded. "A very good woman she is, Binney; but the best of them get so set in their ways that even a change for the better is a calamity. Now you and I will make some profit out of this."

He began to sketch the changes that he had in mind. There should be a little machine-shop equipped; it would save time and labor in mending our tools. And we should have one of the new-fangled disk-harrows, and one of those hot-air pumping-engines. Then, with enterprise unspeakable, he began talking about buying a large stave silo, which he and I could set up.

As I listened I learned something about my father. I knew that he never wasted time in regretting his lack of possessions, nor the wastefulness of his forebears in frittering away the benefits of old-time treasure. Nevertheless, here was revealed a secret occupation of building air-castles. For I saw that his ideas did not spring from the inspiration of the occasion. The whole of the present structure had not only been planned already, filling our needs so exactly—it had been erected before, and now rose again with the greater ease that its joints had been accurately fitted.

But father was perfectly normal in one particular: in his paradise-farm he did not include servants. No maid must help at the house, no hired man must work about the place. Labor-saving devices, yes; but none of us would ever admit to the farm any one with the eye to recognize a find, and the

cunning to conceal it. All helpers were thus ruled out of our count; no change of fortune, short of the discovery of the last two boxes, could make it possible to admit folk to the place. The ancient, half-crippled creature who used to live at Cousin Lon's while Margery was a child, was the only outsider who had ever been admitted to residence among us, and she had had neither the sense nor the courage to steal. Similarly, we on our farm looked for no enlargement of the household, and expected hard labor all our days.

Marvelling somewhat at my father's revealed day-dreams, I slipped away to find my mother. She sat by the kitchen-table, her chin on her hand, gazing abstractedly at the wall.

"Well, mother," I said, my hand on her shoulder. Mother looked up. She was a woman of large frame; I take my size from her. But even at forty, even in spite of her laborious life, her face was unwrinkled, and her skin clear. She looked at me out of her deep gray eyes, and I saw that she was suffering.

"I hoped," she said, "that it never would happen."

"Why, mother," I exclaimed, "when I was a boy we used to dream of it!"

"And now that you are almost a man I have dreaded it," she rejoined. "We live very much by ourselves, but at least we have been safe."

"And why shan't we always be safe?" I demanded.

"There will be changes," answered mother.

"Of course," I returned, feeling, I admit, a boy's impatience with the caution of his elders. "Father is planning for an engine and a silo. You shall have a new stove, new cream-pans, dresses—everything!"

She smiled at the idea that she could be so easily satisfied. "These new people will take you away with them."

In spite of myself I felt a thrill. To go away, out into life! But I stammered a protest.

Mother smiled at my childishness, and rising, set about getting supper without milk.

CHAPTER V

THAT mother was right in one particular I learned on the following day. Father sent me to the upper pasture to salt our young stock, and I took with me Jones, who always enjoyed such expeditions. But at the time when I unexpectedly found need of him Jones had lagged behind, having business with a woodchuck who seemed to be at home. I had come out into the lower pasture when I saw in front of me, about fifty yards away, four big boys busy at the stone wall. Now our walls are very broad, and carefully built of heavy stones, but the lads had already thrown down a rod of it.

I smothered my impulse to shout, and stepping behind a bush, looked back for Jones. The delay gave time to think. I was exceedingly alarmed. A few bands of such marauders, and we shouldn't have a tight fence on the farm. I wondered how to meet the situation.

Presently Jones came hurrying from his conquest. He was a big mongrel terrier, brindled and bristly, and at the moment a most unpleasant sight, with dirt to his eyes, and a bloody slobber at his jaw. He had met one enemy, and was ready for another. At my word he became attentive and very businesslike.

When the four treasure-seekers discovered me close to them they howled, and turned to flee. But seeing Jones, they froze. He was so plainly disappointed at not having an excuse to pin one of them that they rolled their eyes at me in terror.

I named them one by one: of very respectable families they came; one of them the son of a deacon. But I was not angry with them; I could not afford to be. If any of us five had a real terror of the future, it was I. The labor of repairing the damage of a few such raids rose sickeningly before me.

"Now," said I, "you all have gone to Sunday-school, and understand the Golden Rule. I don't want this fence torn down; I want it built up. So do as you would be done by."

They looked ruefully at the stretch of fence, of which but a course or two was still in place. But without whining they fell to. A three-foot fence, four feet broad, is no easy thing to build, but they went at it manfully. I sat and watched; Jones, by occasionally sniffing at their ankles, helped on the good work. As the sun rose higher the lads shed their garments; but in spite of this they dripped water, and after nearly an hour visibly tired. At last the deacon's son turned on me bitterly:

"Consarn you, Binney Hartwell! If I were bigger, I'd lick you!"

"You don't understand, Jimmy Foss," I returned. "If you were bigger I'd lick you. But rest a while, all of you, and let me say something." They sat

sulkily on the half-finished wall, while Jones sat in front, regarding them wistfully.

"I suppose I know why you're here," I said, "though how you know the story beats me."

"Everybody knows it," said one of them.

I winced at the thought that even now other raiders might be at work elsewhere. "You young idiots," I said, using language suitable to their comprehension, "haven't you heard that no two of our finds are ever in the same kind of hiding-place? The old pirate put it down in his will, and it's perfectly true. The first was buried in an open field, the second laid up on a rafter in a barn, the third lying in the middle of a blackberry-patch that later happened to be burned over. There won't be another box found in a stone wall, no matter if you tear down every one on both these farms."

They were looking at each other in shame, not of their present difficulty, but of their stupidity. "Aw," muttered Jimmy, "I'd forgotten."

"Forgetfulness doesn't pay," I remarked. But I was not satisfied. This new shame of theirs might be quite enough to keep them from telling this story—and I wanted it told, as a warning to others. I puzzled at the problem in vain. "Do you suppose," I demanded at length in disgust, "that I can wait here all day for you to finish that wall?"

Jones, taking the hint from my tone, sprang up eagerly. The boys, stiffly clambering down, set again to work. They were doing the job properly,

for all had worked at wall building; and so, taking my bag of salt and leaving them to Jones, I wandered away a little. I was aching to scout for more mischief-makers; therefore, slipping behind a bush, I watched my captives through the screen of leaves. The boys looked after me, and when they thought that I was gone, tried the probity of their other jailer. Jimmy picked up his coat, and offered Jones something from a pocket. The dog growled so fiercely that Jimmy leaped to the wall again; and the others, who had hopefully watched the experiment, fell to work earnestly. I was free to do my scouting.

Quickly climbing farther up the hill, I found the colts in a corner of the pasture, and before them scattered my salt, all except enough for my favorite, Peter, a three-year-old that I had myself broken to the saddle. Him I now mounted, having for a bridle nothing more than a piece of string which I tied, Indian fashion, around his lower jaw. Once on his back, I soon persuaded him away from his companions, and then for half an hour I rode the farther boundaries of the farm, feeling sure that if trespassers came at all, they would come from that side. Finding no one—and much relieved I was—I brought the colt back, gave him the rest of my salt, and started for Jones and his prisoners. Once more the problem of getting their story told in the village began to puzzle me. And while I was thinking upon it I came upon more trespassers.

Clad in quiet colors, so as not to be conspicuous,

two women were wandering across the field. I watched them with joy. In the rocky pasture scattered clumps of trees and bushes grew sparsely, and from one to another went these prospectors. Their parasols were disguised implements, for with their points they pried among the knotty roots, dug moss from crevices, and endeavored to turn the stones. Just as I approached the women from behind, one of them snapped her point.

"Drat it!" she exclaimed, holding up the ruined gewgaw. "Look at that!"

"Too bad, Mrs. Foss," said I.

They jumped and squealed, and fastening their startled eyes on mine, faltered a greeting. They were farmers' wives, sisters; one of them had come at least four miles. Even now her son was working at my wall.

"You've lost your way," I said, being buoyed to an unknown degree of suavity by my mastery of the situation. "You're at least a mile from the highway. Let me show you."

"Oh," said one of them hastily, "we came to call on your mother."

"Even then you're out of your way," I rejoined. "The track is just below here. I'll show you. Beautiful day, Mrs. Foss."

"Beautiful," she answered fervently. But she wiped her brow, and her sister's face was shiny with moisture. They doggedly produced common-places on the weather and the season until, dropping behind them at a narrow way between two

thickets, I ushered them into the open space across which were Jones and his fatigue-party.

Jones, hearing voices, turned, saw the women, saw not his discreetly hidden master, and charged. Too long his spirit had been vexed by boys whom discipline forbade him to bite, but here was fair game. He came like a race-horse, and his snarl was terrifying. Two anguished souls cried aloud for help, and I succored them. Disappointed, Jones could but sniff hungrily at their skirts, while I led the bewildered pair up to the group at the fence.

Jimmy saw his mother, and his hair rose on his head. I knew that he wished that he had risked everything and had fled while Jones's back was turned. But it was too late. Mrs. Foss relieved her feelings by the glare that she cast on her son.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Working for me," I interposed. "Jimmy and his friends were picnicking, I suppose, and the wall fell down. But they're making it all right again."

Mrs. Foss's feelings must have been inexpressible, for she tried to speak and failed. I could not interpret the emotions of her maternal heart, but I detected in Jimmy the signs of fresh dismay. Yet for the other boys, and for Mrs. Foss's sister, the situation was much relieved. I saw the three boys slyly glancing at one another, and surprised a gleam of amusement on the woman's face. And I knew that my problem was solved, and that a journey to town for telling tales was spared me. The four boys, when freed, might have been able

to keep their adventure to themselves. The two women would have been certain to hold their tongues. But the tale of Jimmy Foss and his mother, caught in the same pickle, was too good to keep. It would travel all through the town by night.

"Mother will be glad to see you," said I, offering to lead the way. The tension was broken, and while the women passed on, the boys turned again to the wall. I thought I saw appealing glances cast by Jimmy at his friends, but they paid no attention.

As for the farmers' wives, I led them to the lane, and pointed the way down-hill. "You can't miss the house now," I told them. "Mother will be at work somewhere. She won't be dressed for callers at this time of day, but I'm sure you won't mind that. And perhaps, Mrs. Foss, she has glue for your parasol."

They went on, and paid a very fidgety and brief call at the farmhouse. Mother was mystified by it until I told her my part of the story. The parasol had not been produced.

As for me, going back to where the boys were just finishing their job, I surveyed and approved it.

"You didn't think, of course, to turn the weathered faces out. But never mind, boys. It will take a dozen years to weather this bit like the rest of the wall, and all that time it will remind me of you."

Jimmy Foss, who at first would have been glad to get rid of me at any price, now took his dismissal

surlily. If there had been a convenient hiding-place, I think he would have stayed. To face his mother when he got home, and to wait until the tale reached his father, was not a good outlook for James. But the other boys found in his plight, and in the contemplation of the lost face of the Foss family, balm for their own wounds. They kept together as they walked; Jimmy went by himself in a parallel line. And not one of them hurled back a reproach at me.

That afternoon I took another tour of the place, to see what I could discover. Jones, who was with me, ranged the bushes as if he regretted his lost opportunities of the morning. Luckily I was with him when he discovered the next prospector.

This was a summer person, a vacationer. His white flannel trousers were correctly turned up; he sported a straw hat of proper shape, and a pair of spectacles. He wore the pointed beard of the young college professor, and he carried a cane. With this he was gingerly poking at a hole in a tree. This was absurd, for the tree was not over forty years old.

Jones came ramping from the bushes, and the prospector promptly ascended the tree. The hole made an excellent foot-rest on the way up. Then solemnly he looked down at me.

"You may come down," I said, subduing Jones. "There's really nothing to be alarmed at."

"Your dog is dangerous," he complained when he stood at my own level.

I saw no harm in trying to enhance Jones's reputation. "He is enthusiastic about strangers," I said. "He loves to bring home samples of trouserings. But when I'm with him he's perfectly safe."

"He oughtn't to go at large," said the stranger severely.

"He has an odd prejudice," I admitted, "against people who pay no attention to trespass signs. Perhaps you were not thinking when you passed ours."

The stranger reddened, and had nothing definite to say.

"If you take the shortest way down the hill," said I, "I am sure that you will reach the highroad in fifteen minutes. For that length of time I'm willing to keep the dog with me. Good day."

Mother laughed much at my description of his ambling departure, and I took much pride in my management of my three affairs. Maybe time has magnified my memory of my own cleverness, but I still think I did fairly well. But it was the last pleasure that I took out of inquisitive strangers. Our next visitor was a different sort of person.

CHAPTER VI

It was the third day after the finding of the box, and I had begun to relax my vigilance in patrolling the farm. Signs of trespassing I had seen here and there, in occasional places where rocks had been overturned, or in the excitement of Jones over what appeared to be a trail of some kind. But no one had been so stupid as to pull down any more walls.

As to our attitude toward the two remaining deposits of jewels, it was very simple. One of our forebears—my great-grandfather, to be exact—had spent the remainder of his days, after the discovery in '54, in search of the other boxes. It had exasperated him to have the jewels taken from under his nose, on his own land, by his cousin from over the wall; and he tried to make good the unfairness of fortune. For sixteen years, day after day, the old man wandered over the Hill, and if ever we could be justified in having a ghost, it would be his. He went to his grave at last, and since his time never a Hartwell, on either side of the wall, had given a single unbroken hour to the search for treasure.

It wasn't that we never thought of it, for we did. To be sure, days would sometimes go by when, in the routine of the farm, I never turned my mind to

anything beyond the duties of the hour. And yet such periods were rare. I believe that I am fortunate to have had, throughout my boyhood, the continual hope of better things, the dream of a fortune that might some day raise me above the farm. It turned me to speculation concerning life in the outer world, visions which might some day become reality. It turned me to books, to the cultivation of my speech, to the observation of dress and manner. Yet the drudgery of work with my hands made the outlook on these things a very sober one. I learned, perhaps by the influence of my mother working almost imperceptibly, that much of my hope was hollow, that the future could never bring me all of my dream—yet at the same time I continued to hope and to dream.

Father was less—a little less—practical than I. But we were both of us practical in one thing, the looking into any hiding-place that might contain a box as big as one's fist. I suppose the hardest thing was, having looked once, not to look a second time. There was a certain crevice in a big boulder that lay not far from the entrance of the east woodlot, on the way to the double pine. Once, thinking that I had not sufficiently explored the farther end of this crevice, I left the wood-wagon as it jolted along, and dug for a moment among the dead leaves. When I returned to my father he smiled with a cynicism born of his experience.

"You did that a year ago," he said. "I've done it three times myself. Pure waste, Binney."

Thus I learned the uselessness of ever exploring a hole or a corner for even the second time. Once it was scraped out to the original rock, or bared to the old wood, no hiding-place was worth another thought. But the fact remained that somewhere the old pirate's remaining caches were waiting for us. None of us ever entertained the idea that some stranger had stumbled on one of the boxes, and had stolen with it away. And so I and my parents, and I make no doubt Cousin Lon and Margery, never passed a newly suspected spot without a moment's pause to investigate. And we were always looking out for new possibilities. For that reason there were on our farms, away from the homesteads, no footpaths whatever—always excepting the well-worn way between the two houses. We were too fond of varying our track, forever with an eye out for some new sign. And each of us men-folk carried a favorite tool. Mine was a very heavy clasp-knife, with a four-inch blade which was good for digging or prying. Its point and edge were always dull, but its sides bright from frequent use.

It was wonderful what numbers of possible hiding-places there were. Near the house, of course, everything had been ransacked. I never felt on rafters, nor under eaves. Ancestral hands had been before me; and my own childish fingers had explored every dark crevice in house, or barn, or shed. The barnyard was barren, as we well knew. But the further we went from the centre of our life, the

nearer we came to romance. Up in the pasture, over in the wood-lot, along the fields, no boulder showed itself, no gray stone outcropped, without provoking us to speculation or momentary examination. It would be, perhaps, but for a single minute in the day that we turned aside from work and communed with hope. Nor did we ever deliberately go far roundabout in search of a find. That we knew would be foolishness. There was a fatalism in our feeling concerning the treasure. Maybe we passed it daily; if so, we could not help it. At the proper time it would be revealed.

Well, on this third morning I was going down the road on my way to the village. Jones was with me, and was close at heel when we met a man coming up the hill. The dog knew that strangers had a right to the road; nevertheless, he growled.

The man came steadily on. He was not one of our townsmen; I had never seen him before. Nor was he a city man, at least of good type. His clothes, though not shabby, fitted poorly, and were badly wrinkled. He was of medium height, of medium breadth, of medium complexion. Nothing about him was striking except his eye, which he fixed on me with a gripping gaze that roused in me a sudden resentment. And from the resentment sprang an immediate dislike.

I looked at him more closely as we neared each other. His hat was thrust back, and I saw that his forehead was low. His lank hair was echoed, as it were, by a scrubby chin beard, of the same non-

descript color, that vainly tried to lengthen his short jaw. His cheeks were hollow and pale, his forehead projecting, but his eyebrows almost lacking. Under those strange knuckly brows were deep sockets whence his eyes, red-lidded, glowered as upon a hostile world. He photographed himself, as it were, upon my mind; and after the first long glance I felt that I could never forget him.

Involuntarily I stopped, but he walked on until within a yard of me. "Is that dog dangerous?" he demanded.

"Not if you keep on the road," I answered.

"Hmf!" he sniffed. "In the village they are scared to death of him."

His voice was harsh and his intonation scornful. Evidently he had no fear of the dog, nor of me either. He looked me over as if he were measuring an ox, and with the same scorn. After a moment he demanded:

"Where's your father?"

"He's at the barn," I said. "I'll show you."

"Don't trouble yourself," he responded, pushing by. "I know the way."

Nevertheless, I turned back. Not liking the man, I wanted to keep an eye on him. So I followed in silence.

He snapped over his shoulder: "I said I should not need you."

"I heard you," I answered, still following.

Abruptly he stopped, turned, and looked me over a second time. It seemed as if he were asking him-

self: "*Is this an ox?*" But the result was the same as before, for with a sniff he turned and went on. Growing angry, I followed. No one had ever looked at me so before, nor scorned me to my face. Without more words we walked on until in the barnyard we found my father. The man went directly to him.

"Hullo, Melvin," he said.

"Why," answered my father, after a moment's scrutiny, "it's Al Stidger! Come up from Athol, eh? What brings ye?"

At the answer, "I came from Lon," ideas began to come to me. This man was Cousin Lon's wife's cousin, and lived within ten miles of us, a notary public and self-taught lawyer.

"Did Lon send for ye?" asked my father.

Stidger made no answer, but looked my father over, much as he had studied me. "Yokel!" he seemed to say to himself at the end. He lacked either hypocrisy or politeness.

"I want to talk with you," he said aloud.

"Well," said my father. He turned and led the way to the wall, against which he leaned. Stidger, following, was waved to a seat beside him. I approached, and stood close by; and Jones, silent but still bristling, kept his eye on our visitor while he clambered on the wall. Then Jones sat down, adjusted his jaw by a snap at nothing, and seemed to wait.

Stidger cast at me a lowering look, but that did not trouble me. It seemed to me that something

was going forward that I needed to be in touch with. Father, I knew, was too sketchy to report accurately. So, with Jones, I constituted myself audience, and waited.

With a final glare at me, Stidger turned to father. "You've had a find," he said, with his almost explosive suddenness.

Father rubbed his hands. "Something of the kind," he agreed. "Lon's told ye about it?"

"Precious little," grumbled Stidger. "He's mad about it."

"Can't see why," remarked father. "Sent you here?"

"I came," returned Stidger darkly. "I want to be informed. What was in the box?"

"The usual thing," answered father. "Stones."

Stidger glowered. "Oh, of course. But what kind, and how many?"

Father, showing in his face compunction for his attempt at evasion, was about to reply, and I was startled. Surely there was no need of telling. I demanded: "Why do you ask?"

Stidger tossed his head impatiently, yet answered as if father had spoken. "I'm looking after Lon's interests."

"What interest," I persisted, "has Cousin Lon in this?"

"See here," said Stidger, still speaking to father, "have you a copy of that old will? I want to see it."

"Why, yes," answered father, "I've got a copy, surely. But why don't you look at Lon's?"

"'Cause his is lost," snapped Stidger. "He tells me it ain't been seen for nearly forty year. He remembers hearin' his father complaining it was lost."

"But why," I demanded, "should we show you ours?"

"I want you to save me the trouble of going to Worcester," Stidger answered querulously. "I could go down to the Registry o' Deeds an' get a look at the original any day. Every one's got a right to that. I'm just askin' you to save me my time." He was speaking to me now resentfully.

I looked at father. If this was true, I didn't quite see what to say. The question why the man wanted to see the will neither of us thought of pushing. Father nodded thoughtfully. "Certainly. I ain't anxious to put you to all that trouble. Come in the house."

We followed into the kitchen, where mother was at work. The sight of our visitor surprised her. "Why, Al Stidger!"

"Yes, yes," he said with a kind of impatience. "It's me, Sarah, sure enough. I want a look at that old will."

"Sit down," said father. "I'll get it." I expected him to leave the room, but to my dismay he turned about and opened the door of the Dutch oven, a higher construction than was common, built into the old chimney about six feet from the floor. From it he took a few papers.

"We haven't so many documents," said he,

"that we can't find the one we want. Here's the thing you mean, I guess."

And he unfolded, from among the papers, a piece of unmistakable parchment, yellow and soiled, which crinkled noisily as it opened. Stidger grasped at it.

"That's it," he said, at first glance. "Yes—Lamon Hartwell, 1824." He began studying the will.

Moving to his side, I also began reading this document which I had not seen since I was a child. Though I could not understand all the legal jargon, the purport of the will was clear. The farms, as divided, were given and bequeathed; the cash was to be shared equally; the right to come and go freely, except within dwellings, and with due accountability for damages, was never to be denied by the owner of one place to the family of the owner of the other.

"He meant," snarled Stidger, "that neither of the places should go out of the family. Precious good means he took to make sure."

If my great-great-great-uncle had had this in mind, he had succeeded. Until the last box was found, no owner of either place would consent to sell his property. And here was the description of the boxes.

"Two Oval Boxes, of lead, one flat, one thick.

"Two Oblong Boxes, also of lead, one flat, one thick.

"One Round Box, ditto, flat.

"One Leaden Box in the shape of a cube.

"None of these boxes are set deeper than the mould, nor above fifteen feet from the ground.

"No two of them are in hiding-places of the same kind.

"I leave the finding of them to chance, or to God, whichever my nephews choose, the finder of a box, so he be of my blood, to be the owner thereof, and of its contents, upon whosoever land it be found."

Stidger read and reread these conditions so slowly and carefully that by the time he had finished I had almost memorized them. When finally he looked up at my father he said:

"I want to get a copy of this."

"Very well," answered my father readily. "Come any day."

"No, no," answered Stidger impatiently. "My handwriting is too poor. I want to take it to be typewritten."

Father, rubbing his chin, seemed about to yield. "No," said I positively. "There's no reason it should ever leave this place. Bring your typewriter up here."

Stidger protested. "One of them machines is valuable, and it's delicate. It might get hurt."

"Same with this document," I retorted stubbornly. For the more I thought of the matter, the less I was willing to trust the will, copy though it was, to this man.

He growled a sour and grudging submission. "It'll have to be copied by hand, then. Either

I'll come myself some other day, or I'll send a clerk."

Mother had been so quiet that now I was surprised to hear her speak. "I'll copy it for you myself."

The suggestion seemed to fluster Stidger rather than to please him. "No," he answered hurriedly. "It's got to be by a lawyer, or a trained copyist. Some little slip, even a wrong comma——"

"Oh, she'll be careful," my father assured him. "She won't leave a dot out of place. And her handwriting is perfect."

But Stidger persisted. "I'd not feel easy unless it were done by some one whose work I know."

"What is the need of such accuracy?" I demanded. "What do you need a copy for, anyway?"

He paid no attention to me, but looked at father. The will, folded, he held in his hand as if ready to put in his inside pocket. "Come," he said, in a tone as nearly conciliatory as seemed possible to him, "let me take it down to Athol with me to-day. You shall have it Monday."

I believe that father wavered. At any rate, mother spoke as if to forestall his consent. "No, it must stay here."

And I, taking the paper, which Stidger gave unresistingly into my hand, put it once more into the high Dutch oven. Then I looked at him to see if he were angry, but he was looking at the oven door.

"Well," he said slowly, "some day next week. And now, Mel, let me see them stones."

"Oh!" replied father, taken by surprise. "The fact is, they're gone."

"Gone?" rasped Stidger. "You've—you've—!" Suddenly he sprang up and, coming quickly where father was sitting, thrust his face almost into his.

"You've gin 'em to that man Worthen!"

Father, blinking, drew away. "Well?" he asked uneasily.

"Don't you know he's a crook?" demanded Stidger. "He's a promoter, a bucket-shop man, a curb-broker!"

"I don't know what you mean," stammered father. "He's a banker, folks say."

"Calls himself one," sneered Stidger. "Puts on all that front just to take people in. Don't you never read the papers? He's always mixin' in with wildcat schemes."

Father looked at mother with something of dismay. Did we read the papers? A local journal came to us once a week. It gave, in separate columns, the news of the various towns for some ten miles about; it told of nominations and elections, of the deaths of kings, of distant wars; it printed anecdotes, household receipts, and a weekly thriller. What did we know of the affairs of the money market, or even the great defalcations? Yet we had knowledge that such things were.

"You've given them to him, have ye?" snapped Stidger.

"Yes," admitted father.

"You idiot," snarled Stidger angrily. "You could have had the best of advice and assistance not ten miles from home, and you give yourself into the hands of an outsider. If the stones aren't lost out of his pocket, or stolen from his bag, at least he'll tell you they're paste, and offer you ten dollars for the lot."

We were all very much upset. I saw alarm in my father's eyes, perplexity in mother's. I perceived the horrid possibility that Stidger was right, and that this city man might have imposed on us merely by good clothes, a hearty manner, and an air of confidence. Stidger, looking around on us as we sat with open mouths, snapped his fingers aloft.

"Yah!" he sneered, and moved to the door. He gave at us one final gesture of sweeping disgust and stamped away. Jones was the only one of us with the politeness to escort him out of the yard.

We three remained looking at one another. Mother was the least disturbed; to her the find had been unwelcome. Yet even she was unwilling to be cheated; and as for father and me, we were plain scared. Our thirty thousand dollars!

But we had scarcely recovered enough to begin to put our feelings into words, when out in the yard we heard the clatter of hoofs. Then I heard Gertrude's high, clear voice.

"Binney, where are you?"

I rushed out. There was she on horseback, there behind her was her father, and both were smiling.

Father, pushing by me, went to Mr. Worthen. "Back so soon?"

"Gone and come again," was the answer.

"Well?" asked father.

"You wouldn't have me bellow the news out here?" laughed Mr. Worthen. "We'll go in." He prepared to dismount.

Gertrude had already slipped her foot out of the stirrup, and now stretched out her arms to me. "Binney, take me down."

When I was lifting her down, and in the moment when her face was nearest mine, she whispered: "It's good news!"

The great load was lifted from my heart. Like two children, nodding and smiling at each other, we followed our parents into the kitchen, where Mr. Worthen sat down by the table and drew some papers from his pockets. Very deliberately he took out a pair of glasses, adjusted them on his nose, and began.

"There's only one man I'd take a business of this kind to. In New York the dealers are only so-so; short of Amsterdam, we have in Boston as good a diamond-buyer as there is to be found. Very keen, and not afraid to pay for a good stone. Knows me, too, and that means there is no fooling. Hartwell, he could have pulled the wool over your eyes."

He looked over his glasses at my father, who nervously agreed. Mr. Worthen shuffled his papers.

"The list," he said, "is perhaps rather hard

for you to follow. Number one: India diamond, yellow tinge, old cushion cutting."

Father interrupted. "The single stones I don't remember. Were you able to sell them? What's the total?"

"I sold them," answered Mr. Worthen. "The money is deposited to your order in my bank. And the total?—Thirty-two thousand five hundred!"

It was true! The reaction almost overcame me. Though Gertrude was clutching at my sleeve, clamoring for a word of joy from me, I was speechless. So were we all three, as we sat silently staring at the bringer of good fortune.

CHAPTER VII

"By the way," asked Mr. Worthen when at last we had found voice, and congratulations had exhausted themselves, "who was that person whom we passed in your road, a kind of seedy Shylock?"

"A curious critter," said my father, and proceeded to add a little to my store of knowledge concerning Stidger. He was about forty-five, a widower with one child, unsuccessful as a real-estate agent—how could such a man fail to fail at that business?—and picking up a doubtful living as lawyer or lawyer's clerk. He drew wills or deeds, took notes in court, examined titles. "Soured," said my father in conclusion.

"I should think so," laughed Gertrude. "The 'we-shall-meet-again' look that he threw at us made me hope that it wouldn't be on a dark night."

"What did he want here?" asked Mr. Worthen.

Father told him, and the banker lifted his brows. "Saw the will, did he? Then perhaps I may have a look at it."

He read it in a quarter of the time that Stidger had spent over it. "Amusing," he said as he returned the parchment. "A decidedly quaint old document. Keep it carefully."

"Has it any value?" I inquired.

"Since it's only a copy, no," he replied. "But any of these ancestral things are precious. And so the will has never been tested! That comes of living in a community without lawyers. Your farm mortgaged?"

"Mortgaged?" cried father, his pride in arms. "Neither this one nor the other. Never!"

"Trust a man to know his interest," chuckled Mr. Worthen. "Now see here, Hartwell. What am I to do with this money of yours?"

"Come," whispered Gertrude to me. "They're going to talk business. Let's go and look for another box."

So I followed her out into the sunlight, and we strolled about the yard. Gertrude pounced at a crevice in the wall, and thrust in her prettily gloved hand. Then she smiled back at me.

"Not there," I said.

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"Every Hartwell born in three generations, every visitor since 1839, has explored that hole. Guess again."

"Oh, you clever one!" she cried. And so we loitered about, and for the first time Gertrude began to flirt with me.

"You're changed," she told me suddenly.

"Changed?" I inquired, surprised, but greatly interested.

"You're older," she declared. "Older since I saw you last."

"Three days!" I scoffed.

Gertrude shook her head seriously. "You've grown up."

I wondered if I had. The idea flattered me greatly, and I made her explain. I was more serious, I carried myself differently, my very shoulders. She could not be more definite, but it was enough. I saw myself as a tower, standing four-square to the winds of heaven. And Gertrude, I now discovered, was grown up already. The toss of her head, the glance of her eye, were not what they used to be. Naturally, as I now understand, for if I had changed, so instinctively had she.

We talked until we heard her father shouting: "Gertrude, we must get home before the storm." I looked at the southwest and saw a thunder-cloud just mounting over the hill. We hurried to the hitch-posts, where Mr. Worthen had already mounted, but was still talking with my father. After I had put Gertrude on her horse I waited for a word with him.

"Understand, Hartwell," he was saying, "the wisest of us can't foretell the changes in the market. I'll do my best, but the risk is yours."

"If you do as well as this time, I'll take the risk," said my father.

"Mr. Worthen," said I, seizing a moment's pause, "you must have a place where that old will of ours would be secure."

"Of course," he answered; "my safe."

"Father," I went on, "I don't like the idea of Mr. Stidger's knowing where it is. And if he wants

a copy of it, then Mr. Worthen can have it done in the best fashion."

"The boy is right," agreed Mr. Worthen. "A clever son, Hartwell. You'd better let me keep the will for you." Father went into the house for it, and Mr. Worthen turned to me.

"Binney, are you going to stay here always?"

"No!" cried Gertrude suddenly.

And I, quite thrilled by the spontaneousness of her cry, knew that I was not going to be content where I was. The world had opened to me. So I boldly echoed her "No!"

"Well," said the banker, "when you are ready to come out of your shell, let me help you."

Mother had heard. When the two were gone, she came to me sadly. "I told you so," she murmured.

Then father called me to help him get the tools under cover and the cows in, and we all three hurried to our different tasks. In half an hour the storm was on us; through the open barn-door, as we sat and milked, father and I watched the down-pour and, on account of a three-weeks' drought, were glad of the rain. There was but little thunder; instead, the rain promised to continue all night.

At bedtime it was raining with still greater vigor. From time to time the gusts rose to squalls that lasted for minutes, actually shaking the solid old house. Occasionally, too, came cracks of thunder that made very nervous that otherwise heroic personality, Jones. Nothing less than thunder could

shake his courage; but now he was so apprehensive that I decided to take him to my bedroom. Here I tied him to the jamb-hook, laid a rug for him, and went to bed. The thunder came less frequently, the dog quieted, and I went to sleep.

When the dog woke me it was some hours later. This I had no means of knowing accurately, except for a feeling that the time was after midnight. I heard the rain still drumming on the roof, and supposed that the dog had waked me on account of more thunder.

"Quiet, Jones," I said.

But instead of whining, the dog growled low. I sat upright. This was a warning. "What is it?" I asked.

He growled again, then whimpered eagerly. Though I listened for some cause for his excitement, I could hear nothing. Then for a third time the dog growled.

At that I felt that some intruder was in the house below. And as always with me in any sudden excitement, my heart began beating rapidly. It was useless to try to listen further; my pulse was making too great a pounding in my ears, and again, Jones's low and cautious growling began to be louder. I was vexed with myself.

"All right," I said. "Jones, we'll investigate."

As I fumbled with the knot of the leash the dog acted as if we were hunting together. He could not quite repress his excitement, and his little whimperings and abortive growlings came like erup-

tions of forces under pressure. But he did his best to be quiet. When I had untied the leash the dog tugged me eagerly toward the door. This I had shut, in order to keep Jones, in case he worked himself loose, from roaming restlessly about. Slowly I opened it, and the dog, whose eager tail had been wagging against my bare shins, drew me out upon the landing. There we both stood still, and listened. My nerves were steadier now, from the relief of action, and my pulse was quiet.

My parents were asleep, as I knew from heavy breathing from their room. Stooping over the stair, I listened for sounds from the kitchen. At once I heard the rain pouring from the front eaves into the puddles beneath, and I knew that the outer door was open. Next I smelled candle smoke. All this was wrong, and my heart began jumping again.

Suddenly Jones, with a snort, strained to get away. I heard a step in the kitchen, and let go the leash. Scratching, pounding down the stairs, the dog gave one short, challenging bark before he dashed into the kitchen. I heard the slam of the front door, the thump of the dog's body against it, and then the whole house was filled with furious, disappointed barking.

I leaped down the stairs, stumbled into the kitchen, and tried to look around. The place was pitchy dark, but the candle smell was strong. I groped my way to the door, where Jones was scratching angrily, growling, barking, and whining together. As he heard me coming the dog grew

more excited, leaping and snapping at the door. In the darkness he got in my way, and nearly knocked me over as I reached for the latch. Even when I had lifted it the eager beast prevented my opening the door till I had fairly kicked him out of the way. Then with a yelp of delight he squeezed through the opening. I heard his defiant bark, the splash of his feet in the puddles, before the pouring rain drowned the sound of his pursuit.

I strained my eyes into the darkness, but could see nothing. There was no moon behind the clouds; everything was pitch black. Town-dwellers never realize, I think, the darkness of the country night; for them there is always some glint of light, however distant the source. But for me there was no street-lamp, no faint gleam from a neighbor's window; and as I stood there my eyes might have been shut for all that I could see. Unless I could hear Jones pinning his man, pursuit for me was hopeless.

But behind me in the house I heard my father calling. I went to the foot of the stairs and looked up to where he was standing, with a candle in his hand.

"Some one's been here, father," I said.

Down-stairs he came, sputtering questions, my quiet mother gliding behind. As he held the candle over his head I looked at the high oven. The door stood open, and from where I stood I could see that the cavity was empty.

But beneath it on the floor was a litter of papers.

They seemed to have been dropped in a bundle, and to have spread out fan-shape, as they fell. Above them, on the mantel, stood a stub of candle, which I quickly took down. The wax in the wick-cup was still soft.

"See," I said, and showed it to my parents.

Mother looked at it, at the papers, and at the open oven. "Stidger!" she remarked.

"No!" protested father.

I think we argued it for five minutes, father and I in our absurd night-shirts, mother in her decent wrapper, but all oblivious of time and place and costume. In the warm, steamy night we forgot the open door. Mother and I felt sure that no one but Stidger would have come and searched the hiding-place. Of course he had come for the copy of the will. Father had one objection: the man hadn't the boldness. But remembering his dogged courage as he faced me and Jones in the lane, I thought that he had it in him to do the thing. We were still arguing fruitlessly when suddenly mother asked:

"What ails the cat?"

One of our numerous felines was acting strangely in the middle of the kitchen floor. It was staggering aimlessly, crying faintly. As we watched, it fell; and it needed only a look, after I had picked up the little beast, to know that it was dead.

"Drat 'em!" said father, who hated cats even while he acknowledged the need of them. "That's one gone, anyway."

"But why should she die?" asked mother.

The cat had come from under the table. Examining, I found there a piece of meat, much too great for the cat to dispose of.

Then Jones came in at the door, dirty of foot, and with his hair laid flat by the rain. Straight to me he came, and began his explanation. He whined, he growled, he whimpered, he all but spoke. As I took off the soaked and muddy leash, I patted his head.

"Of course," I soothed. "I know you did your best. It's too dark to see, and in this rain you couldn't follow the scent."

It pleased him, and after one long final complicated sentence he subsided. Then I tried an experiment. Holding the dog by the collar, I showed him the meat. He opened his mouth, then hesitated, sniffed, growled, and turned away.

I put the meat in the stove, where the morning's fire would burn it up. "I suppose our visitor chucked the meat in, and waited a while for it to finish Jones."

Mother shuddered. "Shut the door and lock it!" she cried.

And so, for the first time in many years, our door was locked.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN we discussed our burglary at breakfast, there seemed to be nothing to do concerning it. Besides the candle and the meat our visitor had left no trace. There should, of course, have been his muddy footprints on the floor and his tracks in the soft earth outside; but when we thought to look for them it was too late. Mother had already wiped up the floor; and outside, when we came to look, the tracks of the dog were the only ones to be found. Over by the wall I thought I discovered a heel-print, but even on that the dog had set his paw.

I admit that I was in favor of finding Stidger and charging him with the act. But my father cooled my ardor.

"Will you have him arrested for it?" he asked.

"Why, no," I answered. "I can't prove it."

"Then let him alone," advised father, "or he'll put the law on you."

Such was also Mr. Worthen's advice. He rode over that morning to see father, and we poured out the story to him. After rendering his decision, he asked another question.

"What should he do it for?"

All I could bring forward was that Stidger had wanted to take the will away and copy it.

"But the thing itself is merely a copy," was Mr. Worthen's rejoinder. "Perhaps he expected to find valuables in the oven."

"Everybody knows I've got none," father objected. "And Stidger's no common thief, though I admit I never liked him. Some one may have come prowlin' after pickin's."

It seemed to me very unlikely that any one should expect to find burglary profitable in our neighborhood, or anywhere else in rural New England for that matter, when the towns offered so much more. We never expected anything of the sort; our forms of dishonesty were different.

"But how could any one get in?" asked Mr. Worthen.

"Right through the doorway," answered father, surprised.

"Do you mean," demanded Mr. Worthen, "that you never lock the house?"

"Why should we?" returned father. "No one ever does."

"Well," said the banker shrewdly, "you'll lock up after this."

"Oh, yes!" agreed mother almost fervently.

I gave up all thought of accusing Stidger, but as I went about my work I puzzled about my night adventure. Burglars weren't in the habit of roaming our hills; Stidger knew of the use of the oven as a hiding-place; he had tried to borrow the will. But why he should want to steal it I could not see, and at this point my chain of evidence snapped.

By nightfall I was able to laugh at his disappointment—but I did wish that Jones and I had been a little quicker.

And now began to prey on me a trouble that for three days I had been suppressing. Since the excitements appeared to be over, I had leisure to think of Margery. At the time of finding the box I had shown myself at my worst, frankly, horribly selfish. Gertrude had evidently forgiven my roughness in seizing her wrist when she reached for the box; but with Margery, against whom I had turned but a glance of mistrust, I believed that the wound had been deeper. I was not one to analyze and make clear the difference between the two girls; but I recognized Margery's greater sensitiveness. Now that the thought really gained a firm hold on me, it began to torment me. On the next day I was so bothered by it that after supper I told father and mother that I was going over to Cousin Lon's.

Father, taking the pipe from his mouth, remarked: "He won't be overglad to see you."

"Why not?" I asked. "Is he angry?"

"He hasn't been to the village since the box was found. Every one s'poses he's mad."

"Well," I said, "I'm going anyway."

"If Cousin Lon speaks sharp," warned mother, "don't answer back. Remember how vexing it must have been to see you carry off the box from under his nose."

With this advice I departed, and made my way to the other farmhouse. I had nearly reached it

when, looking back, I saw that Jones was sneaking after me. As soon as he saw that he was discovered, he rushed, all wriggings and apologies, to express his delight that we were together. I was half minded to send him back; but since Cousin Lon had never objected to the dog, I finally allowed Jones to follow.

By the barnyard wall I paused to reconnoitre. No one was visible. I crossed the wall, approached the house, and was about to whistle for Margery, when out of an upper window was thrust Cousin Lon's head.

"Stay whar ye be!" he said darkly, and withdrew.

Idly, while I waited, I studied the front of the old house. Until I had been properly taught, I never appreciated the design of a house as a whole; but there did now creep upon me, for the first time, a sense of the oddity of this one. Our own dwelling was a plain New England farmhouse, and was, with its two stories and gabled attic, its decently generous windows, and the wide front door with its two flanking apertures, by which one could look in as well as out, upstanding and frank. Cousin Lon's house was quite the opposite. Its stud was low, and I believed that from the ground I could almost reach to the tops of the lower windows. The door had no openings beside it; moreover all the windows (and there were but few) were small. The roof overhung heavily, shading the upper windows. Whereas our house was painted a cheerful

red, with trim in white, this house, trim and all, was leaden in hue. I could well believe that the old buccaneer had designed it himself, for it seemed like his own soul, secret and forbidding. And feeling all this, rather than thinking, it suddenly came into my dull head to wonder why I was kept waiting outside this door, which had always been so free to me.

But when the door opened there came out not only Cousin Lon, but also Stidger. The first, long, large-framed, and gaunt, with his strange pallor contrasting with his black locks and broad beard, which grew up into the hollows of his cheeks, did not look at me as he turned aside and let the other pass. Stidger opened on me immediately.

"What do you want here?"

"I came to see Margery," I answered.

"To have a look around, you mean," he sneered.

"To look for more boxes."

His manner was so snarly, so unnecessarily aggressive, that it came over me that he wanted to anger me. The suspicion at once put me into my smoothest mood.

"My dear Mr. Stidger," said I, "this yard is the last place to search for treasure, as perhaps by this time you have discovered."

His mottled skin took on a somewhat deeper tinge, and I hoped I had struck home. "You've no right to go in the house," he said.

"Certainly," I agreed. "But what have you to do with it?"

His attitude was at once brisk and hopeful. "I'm your cousin's legal adviser," he stated.

"I wonder," I said, surveying him, "if he needs you as much as you need him."

In a moment he was deeply red, and stood sputtering, not able to reply. Then Jones, who in the meantime had been sniffing insolently about the somewhat frayed bottoms of Stidger's trousers, gave a growl.

Stidger, in default of an answer to me, drew back his foot as if to kick the dog. Jones squatted, snarling wickedly, his ears flat. In some alarm, I cried: "Don't!"

"Why?" snapped Stidger. But he paused.

"The dog has never bitten anybody," I said. "But I think he's perfectly willing to begin with you."

"I warn you to take him off the place!" he cried, drawing back.

"If you're speaking as a lawyer," I retorted, "put that in writing." Had I not been getting the better of him, he might have made me as angry as I made him. As it was, I disliked him intensely. His untidiness, his churlishness, his bloodshotness—I hated his little red eyes!—were very repugnant. I was very glad to turn away from him, to quiet Jones, and to address myself, though with some anxiety, to Cousin Lon. He had stood with face averted, but plainly listening.

"Cousin Lon," I asked, "mayn't I see Margery?"

He looked at the ground, and began digging with

his boot, but he made no answer. "Why Cousin Lon," I cried, disturbed, "aren't you going to speak to me?"

To my amazement, Cousin Lon began to steal away from me, even while I was talking. In a moment, still looking shamefacedly at the ground, as if he rather than I was at fault, he had slipped around the corner of the house.

With much dismay I saw him go. To be sure, Cousin Lon had never been a companionable man, like my father. He spoke little, smiled seldom, laughed never, and in the last few years had not appeared to notice that Margery and I had grown out of childhood. While we chatted during my visits he usually sat silent, apparently thinking of higher or deeper matters than our concerns. But in his way he had always been kind, offered me his pears or his apples, and allowed me to feel that I was welcome to his house. Because, like all of us Hartwells, I went seldom to the village, and had no intimates off the farm, Cousin Lon was important in my life. I saw him go, therefore, with surprise and great unhappiness.

Then I heard behind me Stidger's harsh voice. "You see you ain't very welcome here."

"Whose fault is it?" I demanded, whirling about. "What have you been doing here these three or four days?"

"Mindin' my business," he answered tartly.

"Yours rather than his!" I retorted.

It was on his lips to brag or threaten; at any

rate, I have seldom seen speech so ready to burst out, yet so securely repressed. As if corking a bottle, he closed his mouth, and I felt that what he had to say I should never know. Then he nodded to me ironically and, turning, went into the house and closed the door.

I was angry enough to whistle for Margery in order to spite him, but the remembrance of Cousin Lon restrained me. If he did not want me on the place, then I ought to go. I was both hurt and sorrowful; my anger was entirely gone as, after one look at Margery's window, I turned from the house.

I had nearly crossed the yard before I heard her voice. There by the cow-pasture lane she stood, well-rounded yet girlish, dressed with a simplicity which somehow was neither prim nor severe. At first glance I saw restraint in her attitude, and paused before going to her. But she smiled, and I went to her quickly. It was not till long afterward that I reflected that never before had there been either constraint or encouragement between us. But I had never yet come to study either Margery's face or her character. The strength in the poise of the head, the firmness in the rounded chin, the self-control in the occasional straightness of the line of the mouth, I missed entirely. What I depended on was the frankness and the warm friendship in the brown eyes.

"Margery," I said eagerly, "come away and let me talk with you."

"No," she answered. "Stand right here with

me, Binney, where any one can see. I mustn't appear to be doing anything underhanded."

The idea, connected with her, made me laugh; but then I quickly traced it to its source. "Margery, what is that man Stidger doing here?"

Margery's clear eyes clouded, but they met mine. "He says that father's got a clear case against you."

"A clear case?" I was puzzled.

"Why," she explained, "you found the box on father's land. It ought to be father's."

The idea made me laugh. It was like assailing the Constitution or the law of gravity. "That's nonsense!"

"I hope so," she agreed. "But remember that I told you."

"Why," I asserted, "Stidger's nothing but a shyster. He's working up the case just to get employment for himself. And meanwhile he's snooping round, I suppose, trying to find a box for himself."

"If he is," answered Margery, smiling, "he gets very little chance. Father hasn't yet let him out of his sight."

"Does he go out at night?" I inquired, thinking of our late visitor.

Margery shook her head. "He goes to bed when we do."

"What do he and your father do?"

Again her eyes were clouded. "I don't know. All I can say is that he's making father very gloomy."

"I wish I hadn't found the old box!" I cried. "I don't believe it will do us any good, and it seems to do you people harm. Margery, you ought to have found it yourself! Why didn't you lift the stone, and not I?"

The cloud on her face gave way to brightness. "I just didn't. Don't worry about it, Binney."

Then I recollected what I came to say, and studied her face to see how she would take it. Margery's most prominent quality was honesty, and just now it was shining in her eyes. Quite satisfied, I spoke abruptly:

"I was very unkind to you the other day."

She flushed at once, but did not pretend not to understand. "It was nothing," she murmured.

"When I saw that box," I hurried on, "it seemed to make a brute of me. I knew what the thing was; I was ready, like a dog, to fight for it. I wouldn't let Gertrude touch it, and was afraid that you might take it first."

"Yes," said Margery. "It wasn't like you, Binney."

"It was," I cried. "It showed what a poor thing I am at bottom. Don't forget it, Margery."

She smiled. "I won't forget that you came to apologize."

"I do apologize," I said. "And don't you want to know what was in the box?"

"No," she said quickly and earnestly. "Don't tell me. They'll be sure to ask me." And she nodded, very slightly, toward the house. I looked.

Two heads were visible at the windows, but at once they vanished.

"There," said Margery, somewhat bitterly. "You see what sort of people we have become."

"Can't you get rid of Stidger?" I asked.

"Soon, I hope," she answered. "And now, Binney," she spoke very gently, "I think you'd better go."

Surprised and a little hurt, I turned to her quickly. Her glance held me. Besides dignity and confidence I saw in her, for the first time, a sweet little air of command.

There was sense in her dismissal. If she was to be questioned, the longer I stayed the more uncomfortable it would be for her. So I said good-by and went. I told it all to mother and father, and we were troubled for Margery—not yet for ourselves.

CHAPTER IX

“AND now,” said father, “to spend money!”

I am glad that he had that delight. For it is a delight to feel that the pleasant chinking of the out-flowing cash need not immediately stop. After my acquaintance with it, I know that to be perfect the experience needs its limitations: to spend without thinking is only dissipation. But to decide that a certain purchase shall be the best of its kind, or to resolve that for a certain period, whether for a month or a day, the thing shall be properly done—that is exhilaration. Whatever other cares there may be, one is satisfied with oneself on the score of expense; the world assumes an aspect of peace; into the waiting palms the coins drop ungrudgingly. And that father had his share, however brief, of this pleasure, is one of my satisfactions.

First of all, he bought for mother: A new pump, new pans, tubs, stove. He bought blankets, sheets, an easy chair; would have kept on buying diligently unless mother had stopped him. He insisted, however, on new clothes and bonnet; and after the arrival of the new dress took great pride in driving her to church—whither I could not follow, lest the place be left alone.

Then father bought for the farm. A little engine, cumbrous beside those of to-day; a lathe with all

possible attachments; various farm tools; and then the silo! It was a busy week while we were erecting it, when every hour my mother came out and noted the progress of the work. Then we had to have a cutter and a blower for it, and much, much paint.

Mother looked on it all with a good deal of amusement, even though with occasional fits of sadness. As the weather-beaten buildings grew spick and span she occasionally sighed, thus rousing father's indignation. What, weren't the house and barn much better for new paint? But she, and I too, had a feeling for things as they were, though I could not follow her in her apprehension that soon everything was to be changed. After all, the bright paint would soon tone down.

One thing mother insisted on: that, if she was to have new clothes, so should we. A little amusing, I thought, to see father in a new suit, making him so spruce and neat, except for one particular. Mother asked what I giggled at, but abated her indignation at my answer and, getting out her scissors, trimmed his beard. Father growled when he looked in the glass, yet with a furtive smile for the man he found there.

My clothes caused dissension. I would get them, but not yet. Indeed! And why not now? Well, I wasn't sure what I wanted. When I knew what was the style—the style! Hear the boy! But I thought that my parents, even mother herself, were pleased at my caution. So I got a new pair

of riding-gaiters, ordered a new saddle and bridle, and was content.

And then I rode to the village to see Gertrude. She had occasionally ridden up to look on at our new enterprises, and once she had walked over with Margery from the other farm. But mostly I had had to be contented with thinking of her among the summer folk at the village. It was into this colony that I wished to pry. Of its existence I was well aware; our butter and eggs had long gone to supply it, while its dribbles of cash were important to us. Its outward aspect I knew well enough—the big, shingled hotel, the scattered residences, the white-clad maidens and the blazered men, and the distant activity of the game of tennis. But not once had I trod the piazzas, nor, except at the store, had I come face to face with the denizens of this other world. It was, therefore, with much interest that I cantered down to my first visit at the hotel.

A haughty youngster came out to see what I wanted, and showed amusement when I inquired for Miss Worthen. His tail drooped, however, when I dismounted and gave him my bridle to hold, with a caution that Peter was skittish. For all that I got the best of him, I was not happy under his superciliousness, nor did I feel comfortable as I began to thread my way among the piazza chairs, most of them occupied, in the direction that he indicated. I was at first very conscious of my bulk as I encountered glances raised from books or turned from chatting groups; but when I heard an

old lady's loud cackle, "That's the young man!" I remembered all the talk there must have been about the box, and became very hot about the forehead and collar. Around the corner I found to my relief a quiet nook, in which I saw Gertrude.

She jumped up—no, she rose. Gertrude's manner varied with her company, as I was to learn, and her demureness was new to me. I glimpsed the reason when she turned to introduce me to her companion.

"Mr. Collester."

Never before in my life had I been "introduced" to a man. According to my memory I came to the ceremony as to the opening of a wrestling-bout, with doubt and caution. I see now that he could have greatly bothered me by formality; even at the time I had a wincing fear that he might stand off and bow—for bow I could not. I liked him, therefore, for coming forward with hand outstretched.

His hand was small and compact, not hard like mine, of course, yet very firm. He looked at me squarely, with a keen and unwavering eye that gave me all its attention and held all of mine. Once in a great while I meet an eye like that and find its owner worth knowing.

"Well," laughed Gertrude, "say something, do!"

Then I became aware that neither of us had said a word. Not knowing what social law I had transgressed, I stammered incoherently. But Mr. Collester laughed.

"There was nothing to say," he answered. "Mr. Hartwell knows I am glad to meet him."

I did know it, but what more struck me was that I was glad to meet him. For I had been disappointed to realize that Gertrude was not alone, and now I felt a sudden, unpleasant surprise to hear her address her companion as "John." I had wished to see the hotel and its people, but I had more wished to see Gertrude. How could I see her when there was a John? Yet, after all, he was the first young man of Gertrude's world that I had met, he interested me, and I was glad to see him.

My recollection of our words and even of our actions are very faint; apparently what we said and did was of little importance. But as we sat conversation did not flag; and then we rode for a couple of hours. Gertrude managed her two men with skill, so that neither of us, I believe, felt that he had any advantage over the other. But we watched each other, for I am sure that Collester observed me, while I studied him. And two things concerning him I learned.

The first was his personality. He was smaller than I, but compact and firm, like his hand, and firm in his countenance also. His whole face, from his eyes to his straight mouth and his well-set chin, showed a composure that it would have been difficult to shake. Not that he was grave, for he smiled readily and joked conventionally; but he appeared to be naturally detached, and analytical of what was passing. An observant man, in other words,

who was engaged in finding reasons, or in classifying. And he was classifying me. Nevertheless, he was polite about it.

And then I studied his costume. On the piazza I was somewhat taken aback by a strange bagginess about the hips, descending nearly to the knees, where the trousers were suddenly constricted almost to a skin tightness. Below were leather gaiters, which were no handsomer than my own. But I was from the first aware that Colleston dressed fashionably; and I knew that my own nether garments, folded within my gaiters, were as different from his (mysteriously ending, I divined, not far below the gaiter top) as was the farm from the city. An odd figure he made on foot, where I might even suppose that in grace I had the best of him; but when we were on horseback, then the neatness of his knees caused me much doubt. He was the swell, I the plough-boy.

On my way home, those trousers of his worried me acutely. I desired the like—but could I wear them? Father's broad humor would soon spend itself; mother would even be a little proud of them; but could I outface my friends in the town? I found myself practising a cool stare at post-office wits.

Well, I must have such a suit, that was all there was to it. When I got home I did extra chores, carried in plenty of wood, pitched hay near the feeding chutes, greased the wagons, oiled the harness, turned the manure. At half past eight father

ordered me out of the manure-pit, where I had been chuckling to myself at the thought of what Gertrude would say if she saw me there. But it was so dark that no one could have seen me unless the darkness had come upon him gradually.

"What ails you?" demanded father. "Such a hog for work I never saw."

I explained. "Just getting ahead of the chores. I want to-morrow off."

"Take it," he replied. "You've earned it. But what for?"

I could not bring myself to tell, and my parents refrained from urging me. My scheme I was scarcely willing to admit to myself. I knew what I was contemplating, but even within my mind it did not take the form of words. When in the morning I saw Athol below me in the valley, and felt within my pocket the lump that constituted my savings for the year, I was still unwilling to voice the wildness of my scheme.

I put up the horse in Warren's stable, and taking off my gaiters, hung them in the office. At my trousers I looked ruefully. They were horribly wrinkled and practically shapeless, yet until then they had been my best. As I wondered if a tailor would be able to restore their freshness, I felt the burden of clothes.

Mr. Warren, asking when I should want the horse, forced me to face the future. I bluffed it. "Maybe in an hour, maybe not till afternoon." And lingering on the edge of a great adventure,

in duty bound I sought a ready-made clothing shop.

The clerk who waited on me was scarcely older than myself, but his friendly manner made me afraid of him. Fearing that he would sell me something in spite of myself, I would not admit what I came for. I looked over the piles of garments, varying from overalls to waistcoats. For years, at wide intervals, I had fitted myself out at this place; it had always seemed to me entirely adequate, and now for the first time I found it unsatisfactory. I compared these clothes with the suit that Colleston had worn. Even as they lay in ordered piles, I thought them clumsy. Their materials looked cheap. Well, they were cheap. I asked a question.

"And what have you in riding-clothes?"

The clerk stared. "Riding-clothes?" He did not know what I meant. I got myself away.

Round the corner I had observed a tailor's shop, with bolts of cloth in the window, draped to represent trousers. I went into the place and, not to waste time, boldly asked my question.

"Ah," smiled the tailor. "Riding-clothes? Just a minute."

He rummaged among illustrated sheets so long that finally I became interested in his search. Groups of smiling young men, in very varied costumes, smirked at each other or at the beholder, from lawns or terraces. Although spick and span, they seemed very happy without the society of ladies.

"Just a minute," repeated the tailor, seeing me observing him. "I saw it just the other day. Ah!"

From among the sheets he drew out the oldest of all, brown and spotted. "Here, sir," he said, and pointed to a self-conscious effigy in one corner. It was wearing a riding-suit.

"This was published three or four years ago," remarked the man. "But I think I could get the pattern."

I looked down at him, a little Jew. "Oh, you send for the pattern?"

"From New York; yes, sir. It will take only three days."

"But if it's no longer in style?"

"Oh, I'll have the newest sent on."

Suspicious grew in me. "Have you ever made a riding-suit?"

He became racial. "Hondreds of dimes. Ven I was in New York."

I shook my head and departed.

My feet took me to the station. Common sense said: "Foolishness!" But even common sense gave way as I perceived a train drawing in ahead of me, its cowcatcher pointing east. I was a little out of breath when I accosted its conductor.

"Where does this train go?"

He looked as if lunatic yokels bored him. "Among other places, Boston." Then he addressed the ether. "Aboooard!"

I mounted the steps. Guilt whispered: "Don't look back." With pride I turned to face any ac-

cusing forefingers. But no one of my acquaintance was on the station platform except the Petersham stage-driver, who paid me no attention whatever. I found a seat, and occupied it in defiance of the opinion of all my little world. Out the window, Athol sped backward by me.

And I was off for Boston! It was a ride into the world. The train swept me into the twisting valley of Miller's River, past Baldwinsville, past Royalston, and in five minutes more I was farther from home than I had ever yet been. "Home-keeping youth have ever homely wits." That justifies some of my stupidity; but how could any of us ever go far from home, with but three to do the work? When I saw Gardner, I looked on a bigger town than I had yet seen; and when we drew into Fitchburg I was highly impressed.

I felt the impulse to get off. Surely such a city could supply me with riding-breeches. But no! There was romance at Boston, while Fitchburg was but Fitchburg after all. So I merely secured a sandwich and a banana, and rode on. I saw the country change character, though God be praised that in New England we are never out of sight of a hill. We went through Concord, and I gawked at it, wondering where the battlefield was. Walden I saw without interest, though some one near me mentioned its name. No one had ever spoken to me of Thoreau. Waltham I recognized as another city, and after it were more woods, but not many. I saw a wonderful stretch of market-gardens, and

then the houses grew thicker and thicker. Surely this was Boston. But everybody sat quiet while we sped through an area more thickly settled than forty Athols. Then we shot out upon trestles over water, and off to the left I saw a great spike which I knew to be Bunker Hill monument. My history books had told me that this was just across the river from Boston. I was first at the door to get off.

And this great roaring thing was a city! If mother could but see it! She had been, as a girl, to Worcester and Springfield to visit relatives, but never since she married. Father had been here half a dozen times, but those were great events, as these were to me. Nevertheless, I remembered Benjamin Franklin and his rolls, and made up my mind not to make a fool of myself. I kept my mouth shut as I looked around, and seeing in five minutes a dozen men as countrified as I was, decided that I could escape notice. I began to hunt for a tailor.

I wandered far before I found my man. There were ready-made stores in plenty, and of considerable dignity too; but with them I had done. I saw tailor's signs also, and even tailor's windows, but none of them looked as if they had any acquaintance with riding-clothes. And then I came out on a great open space, where lofty elms grew, where there were wide stretches of green lawn, and where at a little distance I saw the glimmer of water. Boston Common! Looking on it, I felt the heat and dust and noise of the streets press heavily on me, and I longed for the grass beneath my feet.

But there, up the hill to the right, rose a great building with a golden dome—the hub of the universe! And forgetting everything else I began to climb toward it. It was my strong desire to wander in and lose myself in its cool historic depths; but half-way up the hill I stopped. I had come for tailors.

As I glanced uncertainly about me, my eye fell on cloth in a window at the level of my shoulders. Just a bolt of cloth, lying carelessly on the window-seat: what was it doing in a private house? But that was a store alongside, as its sign showed; and there were other rolls of cloth in the recess behind this glass. This was the shop of a tailor; and surely a tailor who did not require the aid of at least a brass sign must be a man of mark. I entered the place of measurements.

The man who met me might well have been got up for a stroll on the Common. He wore a long coat with silk facings, which somehow suggested formality; he had a flower in his buttonhole, and he wore a tie which was neither white nor gray, but most elegant. His beard was exquisitely barbered. He and his costume reminded me of the Prince of Wales, as made familiar on cigar-boxes in the store and in the public prints. But I knew that this was the owner of the shop. He smiled at me inquiringly. I wonder if I looked more like a customer or an errand boy. An inspiration seized me.

“I want,” said I, “some riding togs.”

The last word placed me in the buying class. The tailor smiled with understanding. "Exactly," he said.

His first question or two confused me, and I almost lost courage. He was still not sure of me—eccentric, or really a rustic? But his eye looked human, and on an impulse I put myself into his hands.

"Look here," I blurted. "I'm from the country, and I know I look it. But there are city folk near us, and I like to ride with them, and I've seen a fellow in clothes that look to me all right. Only, for heaven's sake, don't make me look like a fool, all fussed up in duds that don't belong to me!"

And now it appeared that this tailor was a man. His eye gleamed, and I felt the pressure of his hand upon my shoulder. "I came from the country myself," he said. "Leave it to me."

He muttered to himself, "Sack coat—Harris cloth," and other phrases from a strange vocabulary. Then he called his minions, who puttered around me with tape and square and called out numbers which were echoed from behind a partition. One man came for the trousers alone, and to my surprise the sole business of another was to measure for the vest.

"If I might suggest," murmured my friend in my ear, "an extra pair of trousers, of ordinary cut, for other occasions."

"Good!" I agreed.

He showed me the cloth that he advised, a rough

fabric that caused me to doubt. The colors were odd. But he insisted that he was right, and I had given my individuality into his hands.

"And for—best?" he asked. "Say one more suit, of this?"

It was a wonderful dark blue, and I fell in love with it. But a dreadful thought intervened. "The price?" I faltered.

He looked at me with sinister meaning. "Did any one send you to me?"

"No," I explained. "I just saw your window."

He became thoughtful. "You pay cash?"

"Yes," I answered.

He was kindly. "I will give it to you cheap," he stated, and named a sum which made me gasp. And the riding-suit was just as much? More! I turned bitterly to the window.

He murmured behind me. "I was afraid you didn't know. I made it as low as I could."

I wrestled in spirit. It was shocking extravagance. I had no right to buy the one suit, let alone two. But I wanted them. And it was I who found the box. Father would back me. Recklessly I turned and gave the order.

He nodded approval. "You go back to-day?"

"Oh, I must," I assured him. "Five o'clock at latest."

"Come at four for a fitting."

Some one, a foreman, I supposed, gasped in a corner. I turned to go out. My tailor followed me.

"If I may suggest," he said on the steps, "the

clothes will look better if you also have the correct thing in the rest of your dress."

More cost? But I recognized the truth, even though I gazed at him imploringly.

He was firm, and named my needs. "Hat, collars, ties, shirts, shoes. Indispensable." And he told me where to buy them.

Seven hours later, as my horse climbed the long hill that led to Petersham, I looked in the darkness off to the eastward. There was a dull gleam on the horizon that showed where Gardner lay; but Boston, the city of dreams, was beyond my ken. Yet I knew that I had seen it, its crowded streets, its green Common, its ancient edifices, its kind tailor. I had a faint impression of its noise and its heat, but mostly it shifted like a kaleidoscope before my eyes. And I was eager for the future, and for the two new suits of clothes.

When the box arrived I allowed mother to open it. Uppermost lay the homespun, and her face fell at the sight. Good cloth, of course; but to go riding with Gertrude in—! The blue serge she fell in love with, however, and so was satisfied.

But father's amusement when I first appeared in the riding-breeches was uproarious. I swelled out in the middle like a squash, he declared—or like a clown; exactly like a clown. He knew what the boys in the village would say.

So did I, and they said it, and it vexed me. I dismounted at the post-office to go in with a basket of eggs (mother never thought of sparing me), and

my new dimensions attracted the eyes of the loafers. Binney Hartwell's pillow-cases were, from that time, bywords. I felt that my grin was a very feeble one; and I never used my haughty stare at all. Yet, to my satisfaction, the men in the store were indulgent and shut the boys up. It struck me that since the finding of the box the men had looked at me differently.

On the hotel piazza I found Gertrude, alone. She danced toward me. "Binney! What lovely—what scrumptious—what awfully good-looking clothes!"

"Indeed?" I asked as if amused.

"And the fit!" she cried.

"Just ran over to Lunnon," said I. For all her teasing, I would not tell her where I got them.

The approval that I most wanted, however, was Colleston's. I watched him when he came; I kept my eye on him during the first five minutes. I saw that he took notice of me, and was satisfied with his signs of courteous interest; but when Gertrude left us for a moment he turned to me directly.

He took my sleeve between his thumb and forefinger. "Boston?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Dorset's, on Park Street?"

"Yes," I said again, surprised.

"Upon my word!" was his sole remark. But I was satisfied.

CHAPTER X

I SPECULATED as to what Mr. Collester was. To begin with, he was older than I by some years, though I could not tell how many. The composure of his manner showed experience; his frame, though still athletic, had lost its spring; and while his cheeks were round and full as a boy's, and were fresh as an apple, there were little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Thirty, going on thirty-five, was where I classed him, with a little thought (I still have it) that perhaps he was older yet. He rode with the precision and formality of the riding-school, but I took some lessons of him. My seat was firmer than his, yet I learned, by watching him, to keep my elbows in, my hands down, my toes straight forward. A little good, honest jealousy is a wonderful stimulant.

And a little jealousy I felt. What this man was doing here; why he seemed to belong to Gertrude, and must ride with her and me; if really, she being but a girl, and he a man grown, he meant business: all this I wanted to know. Gertrude was scarcely nineteen; I was only twenty; and surely there was plenty of time before we thought deeply of life. If this man insisted on lugging seriousness into our good times, it would be very disturbing. I recog-

nized that I might have to make up my mind before I wanted to—which thought, as I look at it now, was more than presuming, there being such a difference between the farm boy and the city girl. But my confidence was supreme.

We went this morning to Cousin Lon's, Gertrude intending that Collester should see where the box had been found. I noticed that my Peter contrasted with the other two horses. Gertrude's was her own, with all the paces, though she most used the single-foot. The action of mine was free and natural; his gaits were but the run, a canter, and a loose and rangy, although uneven, trot. A hard beast to ride, I think, for any one not used to him. Collester's mount was a medium-sized chestnut, a formal and machine-like trotter, that nevertheless showed some enthusiasm when it came to a race. Collester backed him well, and it struck me that the two were well suited.

"Surely not a Petersham horse," I remarked.

"Surely not," laughed Gertrude. "Mr. Collester uses none but his own. He rode this one up from Boston."

So, I inferred, Collester kept more than one horse for mere pleasure, and doubtless had an income according. I grudged it him.

We clattered up the road to Cousin Lon's, as gullied and stony as my father's own. Gertrude dashed ahead into the yard, and I let Collester go second, since I wished not to take any liberties there. I felt sure that Stidger had gone; we saw neither

him nor Cousin Lon, but Margery was coming from the barn as we burst in. We left our horses tied to the rails, and went out with her to view the place where I had found the box.

To me Margery was a welcome addition, since she gave me Gertrude to myself. Collester took to Margery at once; every one does; she was as neat as if expecting us, and she smiled on him very kindly. "The men like her," said Gertrude as the other two walked ahead of us across the fields. "But she doesn't flirt, as I do."

Thus, having provoked me to declare that she did not flirt, Gertrude began to flirt with me.

We went and looked down into the tiny hiding-place, one of the few reminders, besides a little wealth, that still speaks of the old buccaneer. He must have made the cavity himself, very curiously and neatly; folk come nowadays to find it, and remove the cover, and put their hands down into it, and wish. I found that the wall at that point was based on an outcropping of ledge, so that no frost could heave it. Collester looked at the hiding-place with great interest, and bowed to me.

"You are the only person I know that belongs in a real romance."

"Margery, too," corrected Gertrude. "She may yet find the other two boxes." And she put her arms around Margery, as if defending her, which was very pretty and effective, though a trifle artificial—which I didn't recognize at the time, though I suspect Margery and Collester did. Collester

begged pardon, and included Margery in his statement.

"It's her turn," I agreed. "And on my land, too, I hope. It would be only fair."

On the way back the two girls walked together. Colleston put a question or two to me, concerning the pirate and his jewels. "Curious," he said, "that this will isn't better known. Such a provision would have led to lawsuits in most families, years ago. But you seem to even matters up in the long run. At the same time there seems to be no permanent advantage from these stones."

"This time there will be," I said confidently. "We've put in a lot of improvements already."

He looked at me, I think, as an older man does at a younger, when politely gauging the depth of his ignorance. "I meant," he said, "saving the capital. You will invest it, perhaps?"

"Oh," I said, "father has arranged all that with Mr. Worthen."

I must have spoken a little loftily, for he begged my pardon. At first he seemed still to be studying me; but when I looked at him he was gazing elsewhere and was whistling softly. We said nothing more.

Margery asked us into the house. "You're not proposing to give us tea!" protested Gertrude.

"No," laughed Margery. "But I've milk, and cookies that Mr. Colleston may like."

"Cookies!" exclaimed he. "Oo!" And they smiled at each other frankly. Here was an instinctive friendship.

"Confound him!" I thought. "Both my girls!" I went in sulkily, and would not take any food. Both my girls, and he a man of thirty, thirty-five, forty for all that I knew. I had not made up my mind to dislike him, but I was ready to. He was too calm. If he had but shown a little jealousy—anything!—it would have cheered me up.

We three rode away to the main road and turned south, intending to take the Templeton road and circle around to the southeast until we reached home again. But, not being cheerful as yet, I fell behind the other two as they cantered on, and so came to an adventure which at first I did not recognize as such.

In the hollow of the road there sat on a stone a figure that rose as we approached and turned a pale face up to us. The face struck me, for in spite of white lips and a forehead streaked with the dust of the road, there was a smile of admiration on it. But the smile was wistful, too, as if it said: "Oh, knights and ladies, a word of guidance for the beggar-man!" So, being quite willing to lag, I reined up and looked down on the lank figure and the up-turned visage.

He was a weedy stripling, so wabbly from the mere outgrowing of his strength that he seemed to stand unsteadily. Looking on him, I became compassionately conscious of my own thews.

"Can I direct you?" I asked.

The face lighted up with a timid pleasure. There was something very humble in the gratitude of the

brown eyes and the smile that trembled at the sensitive lips. But the cheeks were hollow as well as pale, and I wondered if it were not physical weakness that made the mouth so tremulous.

"I was looking," he answered, "for Mr. Alonzo Hartwell's." And he half drew a letter from his pocket.

His voice had a deep and pleasant ring; it was oddly mature for his age, which I took to be perhaps a year less than my own. Its mellowness contrasted, too, with his appearance, so little was it underfed. And as I used the word, I realized how well it fitted him. He looked as empty as an envelope.

It occurred to me that he must have come from Stidger. No one else, whether for secrecy or for safety, would have refrained from trusting the letter to the mail. "Didn't Mr. Stidger," I asked, "give you a breakfast before sending you off?"

He was startled, but answered quickly: "Oh, I had some breakfast."

I knew that he could not be planning to remain at Cousin Lon's. "And you are going to walk all the way back to Athol?"

"Of course," he answered bravely.

"You have overshot your mark," I told him. "The house is nearly a mile back, on the first road to the left. Now, will you do something for me?"

His face, in which I had at first seen no distinction, lighted winsomely. "Certainly."

I found a scrap of paper and scribbled a note to

Margery. "Give him the milk and cookies that I did not take." Folding it, I gave it to him. His hand was long and thin and shapely.

"My cousin is at the house," I said. "Give that to her. And one more thing——"

"Yes?" he said willingly.

I paused before I ventured. But I had liked him on sight, I felt protective toward him, as to a luckless dog that I wanted to harbor, and I believed that he would not resent a kindly offer.

"Don't walk back," I said. "You know the Petersham stage?" He nodded. "It goes by to Athol some time after four. Wait for it by the road, make the driver take you in, and tell him it's my treat."

His eyes shone up at me gratefully and without pride. He nodded. "Binney Hartwell's treat."

"Why, yes," I admitted. "How did you know my first name?"

"I knew you," he said simply, with a kind of shy contentment.

"And you'll do it?" I demanded.

"I'll do it," he answered. He pointed along the road. "And they're waiting for you."

So they were, and I had forgotten them. Waving him a good-by, I hurried to where the other two stood at the top of the next rise. They were talking interestedly, asked for no explanation, and we rode on together; but this time I was cheerful again, and kept pace with them.

We turned down the Templeton road and wan-

dered on our circuit. It was an hour before we faced home again and saw a thunder-storm coming. That was a summer for storms; we had a full dozen of them in July and August alone. Gertrude did not like the outlook; nor, to be frank, did I. Valor is wonderfully tempered by discretion for one's clothes. So we raced willingly to the village, which we reached in plenty of time. She and Colleser invited me into the hotel, but I shook my head, and shouted, "Chores!" as I made off in a clap of thunder.

The storm overhung me as I rode for more than a mile, but no rain came down. Great swirling clouds drove over my head, and from them came great peals. Three times I saw the lightning leap, but only from cloud to cloud; and as I hurried along the high ridge there was as yet no rain driving from the west. But as I set the horse to the hill that led downward past the Diamond farms, over in the distance Orange was blotted out. I felt the first gust of the chill that preceded the down-pour, and shook the reins on Peter's neck. "Now, old boy, for the sake of my suit!" Exhilaration seized me at the vigor of his response. We reached the curve, swept around it—and Peter swerved to the right so suddenly as almost to throw me.

Some one, rising from the grass, had stepped out into the road at the sound of our coming. So much I guessed, as I saw him turn to leap back again. I would not have checked Peter, even though I recognized Stidger's messenger, had I not

seen him trip, twist, and fall. I heard his scream of pain, stopped Peter with a great scattering of pebbles, and went back. The boy lay upon the grass, and turned up to me his white face.

"My leg!" Then he fainted.

Surely enough, the leg, strangely twisted, seemed broken above the ankle. And there the lad lay, while beyond our hill the rain was sweeping nearer. I knew the stage had not yet left the village, and no one at all was in sight.

There was nothing else to do than to take him home with me. I could scarcely drop him on Margery's hands, and our house was the next nearest. It would have been a long, hard ride to the village; it was hard enough as it was. With difficulty I got his dead weight across the saddle before me. I hoped that the jolting would not rouse the lad as I carried him up our farm road and to the house. With a scared face, mother met me at the door. I got him under cover as the storm broke, and together we put him on a bed. Then, with a poncho to cover my good suit, in the driving rain I hurried for the doctor.

CHAPTER XI

It was a whole month later when, on a fine September day, I sat with Margery on the door-step and watched Joe Rodey limp about the orchard, managing his cane with one hand while he picked up apples with the other.

"He's almost well," said Margery.

"Favors his leg," I pointed out. "He needs another week before he can give up the stick."

"And not a word from Mr. Stidger all this time," she remarked.

It was just as well, I thought. I wanted nothing to do with him. Margery sighed.

"Does he still come to your place?" I asked.

"He writes to father," she explained. "Every week at least. I don't know what the letters say, but they make father moody."

"Burn them before he gets them," I suggested.

She smiled. "He burns them afterward. I'm only glad that he doesn't keep them to read over again. It's bad enough as it is."

I murmured my regret that I had found the box. Yet I did not really mean it, not yet, although regretful that Margery was distressed in consequence. And just now, idly watching Joe, my attention was called by the fact that something had disturbed him.

He stood half crouching, looking over the wall and down the lane. Then, limping in haste, he made for us.

"What is wrong with him?" asked Margery.

"There can be only one thing," I reasoned. "We have been speaking of the devil. Stidger's coming."

And he was. Joe, coming to us with clouded face, his eye shifting toward the road, murmured: "Mr. Stidger!"

I am ashamed that in those days I considered him a boy, myself a man. So, seeing his apprehension, I laid it to childishness, rather than to ignorance of his own rights and the habit of obedience through three years of ill-nourished drudgery. Nor had I yet learned that the nervous dread of a conflict of wills, in persons who understand the issues of such conflicts, is quite as much to be respected as the happy-go-lucky blundering of such men as myself, whose chief dependence is physical strength. But with a good-natured impatience, I saw that Joe was trembling.

"He won't eat you," I said. "Sit down, be comfortable, and ask him why he hasn't paid you some attention before." These being quite impossible for Joe, I had to think of something else to do.

The grindstone stood close by, and I placed a chair beside it. "Now," I said, "turn that stone either with your hand or your good leg. Whenever I tell you to turn, turn!" And for want of something better to sharpen, I took out the old knife with which I hunted for boxes. From the

can that stood at hand I soused some water into the trough, and we began to sharpen the knife. The employment steadied Joe and made Margery smile. Out of the corner of my eye I looked for Stidger.

He strammed into the yard with his usual scowl, and marched up to us truculently. At sight of Margery he made a dab at his hat; at me he glowered; at the boy he sneered.

"So," he said. "Just loafing here, are you?"

Joe flushed blotchily. "They won't let me go yet," he explained.

Stidger turned on me. "So you're keeping my clerk here, while I have to do his work!"

"I hope you intend to pay him, just the same," I said.

"Pay him!" scoffed Stidger. "The feller that broke his leg can pay him, and board and lodge him, too." He turned again to Joe. "When are you coming back?"

"Perhaps another week."

"No, ye don't!" Stidger snapped. "You come at once or not at all. There's work that I've got to be helped with, and if you don't come I won't keep the place open for you any more."

I had listened with much interest, while pretending that my sole interest was in grinding the knife. Stidger's selfish eagerness to get the boy again was natural; not so the contempt that was so plain in his manner. Now that I can look on the man with better understanding, and with a little pity, I can feel some admiration for the perverted cour-

age that made him snarl where he would not truckle, and snatch where he could not persuade. But I had no sympathy for him then. Joe gasped, the wheel stopped turning, and looking up, I found Joe pale with dismay.

"I'll come to-morrow," he stammered.

"You'll turn the wheel," I commanded. "And you won't go back to Athol till I let you."

Joe began to turn again, weakly. I saw Stidger's feet move nearer to me. "What business is it of yours?"

"Why," I answered, grinding carefully, "you've just told me yourself. If I'm responsible for his broken leg, I'm responsible for healing it. Faster, Joe."

"He's well," asserted Stidger impatiently. "Just look at him. Been growing fat."

"That's because he's well fed," I retorted.

"If he can sit here and grind," insisted Stidger, "he can sit at a desk and write." I felt the wheel slow down.

"Faster," I urged. "Yes, Mr. Stidger, that's all very well; but how soon will you send him on another fourteen-mile walk with only a glass of blue milk for breakfast?"

I had guessed at the blueness of the milk, but Stidger did not raise the point. "There was bread," he snapped.

"Offered, but not given," I retorted. "No, he doesn't leave me till he's well. Another week at least, the doctor says."

"Leave off that grinding!" exclaimed Stidger, exasperated. "It ain't so important."

I looked up at him. "A very important knife," I explained. "A four-inch blade, and very strong. I've given it a good point for the first time in years. It's what I look for boxes with."

He had been getting finely angry, but now at the word he controlled himself. His face remained red, but he closed his mouth firmly, and with the action seemed to swallow his wrath. "Then," he asked slowly: "I'm to understand you won't let the boy go?"

"It wouldn't be right," I answered, myself sobered a little by the change in him. For though his anger was repressed, I felt that it was just as strong within him, and the more dangerous because under control.

"Very well," he said. "Joe, you needn't look for more work from me." He turned to go.

"Where are you going?" I demanded. For he was making for the wall, at the place where we commonly crossed to go to Cousin Lon's.

"Where I please," he flung back at me.

"If you're going to the other farm," I told his back, for he was marching on, "the way is down the road."

He stopped with his hand on the wall. "But that's a mile farther."

"I can't help it if it's ten," I answered. "Nobody crosses our land."

He showed his yellow teeth as he looked back at

me, in a grin that reminded me of a rat's. Slowly his foot came up and found a crevice in the stones. Shutting my knife, I rose and went over to him, while he waited in the same position. He looked yet more like a rat as I drew nearer, with his little red eyes gleaming sharper. But he was small and scrawny, and I did not wish to quarrel with him.

"You know," I said, "that you ought not to cross that wall."

He looked away and set both hands on the top of the wall, as if to spring over it. That was enough for me.

"If you do," I said, "I'll throw you back again—and that's a legal warning, Mr. Stidger."

Slowly he turned and faced me; then suddenly, overcome by exasperation, he ground his teeth at me. I had never heard the sound before; it was full of passion, and involuntarily I stepped back. Then with a gesture of both hands, as if throwing from his breast the whole load of his anger at me, he turned and walked away. Very soberly, taken aback by his strange action, I went and sat down by the others.

"What did he mean by that?" asked Margery in a low voice.

I could not tell. If I had felt myself a man before, I knew myself now to be but a boy, oppressed by the undeniable advantage which the mere weight of years gives to an adult. I felt inexperienced, unstable; I wondered if he could do something which I could not prevent.

"Oh," Joe broke out suddenly in a trembling voice: "He is a hateful man, a revengeful man! I ought to have gone back with him."

He restored my courage. "You ought not," I declared. "You never shall have anything more to do with him."

"How shall I live, then?"

I would have said, "Live here"; but, though we had come to like Joe for his humility and responsiveness, that was impossible. "There are plenty of places for a fellow like you," I stated confidently. "Don't fret about the future, Joe. Don't worry about anything at all. There, you've got grease on your hand. Go in and wash it off."

"He thinks the world of you," said Margery when he had gone. "He will talk about you by the hour."

"What he hasn't made clear," I remarked, "is how he happens to have known me by sight. He seems to have been in the habit of watching for me in Athol streets."

Margery explained. "You have attracted him by the quality he hasn't got, your strength. He goes to watch you every year, pitching in the game against Athol. He and Bertie Stidger."

"Bertie Stidger?" I asked, surprised. "Who is he?"

"Bertha is her real name," explained Margery. "Mr. Stidger's daughter, a frail little wisp, not yet ten. Twice they have slipped off to the game together."

"She, too?" I asked. "I wish they would impart a little of their feeling to her papa. Margery, how shall I find work for Joe?"

"I should ask Mr. Colleston," answered Margery promptly.

"Colleston?" I asked. "But he lives in Boston."

"Joe has no ties, no relatives at all," she reasoned. Joe, we had found, was a poorhouse child. "He will be willing to go to Boston—especially if you go there."

"If I go there," I mused. "Hm!"

It was a pleasant subject for musing on. We had all hinted at it, but as yet indefinitely. I felt as if I were on the threshold of change, were on my way to becoming, or doing, something.

"Gertrude," said Margery, "is coming up this morning to see you about it. She ought to be here now."

"Upon my word!" I exclaimed. So that was why Margery had come over in working hours, when she knew, too, that mother would be at the village. I did not feel quite flattered. What scheme did they have on foot for managing me? But I had no time to ask questions, for here came Gertrude, tumultuously charging into the yard, her favorite entrance. Colleston, more sober, was behind, so that I had the privilege of taking Gertrude from her horse.

"Oh," she broke out when we were all seated, "I have seen that man again. His fists were

clinched, and I know he was muttering, and he scowled at me so! What was he doing here?"

I told her, and she fluttered with the prettiest interest. "He looks so dangerous. How could you?"

"Do you mean," asked Colleston, interested, "that you really refused to let him cross your land?"

"We let nobody cross," I answered. "All the land is posted."

"And if I wanted to wander about?"

"Mr. Colleston," I laughed, "I will go with you anywhere."

"Most interesting," he murmured.

"And most natural," I claimed. He agreed. I asked him my question, what to do with Joe.

"What work has he done?" he inquired.

We called Joe from the house and made him give an account of his work with Stidger. "Copying and errands," summarized Colleston. "I can put you in the way of something better." His eye lingered over Joe, as if he liked him.

Joe had a winsome shyness, like a girl's, that called blushes to his cheeks, and made his plain face seem almost handsome. He thanked Colleston, but turned a hesitating eye on me. Should he go?

"Boston is a big place," remarked Gertrude demurely. "Binney, why don't you go and take care of him?"

"I should like to," I agreed readily.

"You know," went on Gertrude, "your father has been speaking to my father about your going to

Boston after the crops are in, and spending the winter in business. Isn't it a good plan?"

It was. I wanted the city. I was eager to go.

"Mr. Colleston," said Gertrude, "probably could make room for you, too."

I was—stumped. It was meant as an offer; she had come to make it. And Colleston, looking up at me, nodded. Margery was watching me eagerly. "But," I stammered, "my father had some idea that Mr. Worthen—" I stopped. I couldn't claim a similar offer from the banker, but I had hoped for it.

"But, Binney," remonstrated Gertrude earnestly. "Oh, come and talk with me!"

She took me away from the others, and I leaned by the wall where I had threatened Stidger. Gertrude stood in front of me; she was flushed and embarrassed.

"You want to go to the city," she said. "What sort of thing should you care to do?"

"Money interests me," I told her. "Investments, now that we have capital to invest. Brokering or banking, I suppose."

Her face fell. "Don't you care for the law, Binney?"

I divined that Colleston was a lawyer. "But," I objected, "that would mean years of study first."

"Some good lawyers," she argued, "never go to law school at all."

"They study all the harder, then, outside," I returned. "And I'm nothing of a student, Gertrude."

"Mr. Colleston handles money," she said, trying again. "I know he does. We can ask him, if you like."

Involuntarily I looked over to the door-step, where Margery and Colleston, seeing the action, hastily became absorbed in gazing at the orchard. I felt exasperated, as a man does when he discovers that his womenfolk, plotting to influence him, have called in the aid of an excellent but somewhat superior friend. But Colleston was not my friend—not yet. And like a young prince, instead of marvelling that this fine creature, still so much of a stranger to me, our acquaintance being almost accidental, our ties of the flimsiest, should trouble herself with me for a moment, I stood doubtful and suspicious of her purpose.

"But why not go to a real broker?" I demanded.

Gertrude shifted her ground to meet me. "You can. Mr. Colleston can perhaps tell you where to go."

I was getting vexed by this determined blocking from my own purpose. "Why not ask your father?" I inquired shortly.

Herself vexed, she was equally short. "Father will take you into his own office."

Relieved, I was ready to smile. "Oh, I was afraid he wouldn't."

"But, Binney," she cried, with a change as swift as mine, "you must—you must—" In embarrassment she clutched at my sleeve. "You must promise me to refuse it."

"Refuse it!" I exclaimed.

"Ask Mr. Collester," she suggested, "if you won't do better elsewhere."

"No," I said coldly. "I don't see any reason for consulting him."

Gertrude's hands fluttered at my shoulder. "Binney!" she pleaded. I was a fool not to yield to her genuine distress. Instead, I demanded reasons.

"Tell me why I shouldn't go with your father."

Stupid of me! How could she speak plainly on such a subject? Gertrude drew herself up, and showed me a glimpse of a side of her character which I had never yet seen. I had felt that she was purposeful, and that her playfulness and whimsies might easily hide her determination to have her own way. But until she stood and stared at me, as now, I had never suspected her capable of cold anger against a trespasser on ground which a man of sense should know was forbidden. And even now I pressed forward so hastily that I did not clearly see my offense. For I thought I had an idea.

"Do you think I'll bother you too much?" I asked jealously.

She looked at me in haughty silence, then turned and went back to the others. I followed her stiffly. Margery studied our faces, first anxiously, next with disappointment. Thanking Mr. Collester, I said that I could probably not accept his offer. Then, with perfect lightness, Gertrude began to laugh about Stidger and his gloomy aspect. And so it all passed over.

Or appeared to. But Gertrude's chill disgust had impressed me. I was embarrassed and gloomy, and was glad when the visitors went. And though, failing entirely to understand my own offense, I reasoned that the girl had asked too much of me, I was nevertheless troubled until evening.

After supper Mr. Worthen, alone, rode up to call. Interested and conscious, I lingered at a little distance until father called me to the door-step where my three elders sat. Mr. Worthen glanced at me with a quizzical smile, father looked at me proudly, mother a little sadly.

"There, Mr. Worthen," said father. "There's the boy that found the box. His mother and I want to make of him all we can. He's earned it. Hasn't he, mother?"

I took no special heed that mother smiled patiently, and made no other answer. Mr. Worthen had my real attention, and now he fixed me with his eye.

"Binney," he said, "your father has asked for my advice. Do you want to hear it?" I nodded breathlessly. "It's to put you at work with me. Will you come?"

"Oh, I will!" I cried.

"Wait a minute," he said. "You ought to understand what the work is." He leaned forward, his gray eye piercing me. "My business is complicated. Let me warn you of that. I'm a broker, my boy, the biggest in Boston. I have half a dozen branches to my work—stocks, bonds, flotations,

banking, and so on. Don't you dream for a minute that you can learn it all in a day. But I can give you such a chance as nobody else can. I'll keep my eye on you. I'll bring you forward. You've the makings of a clever man in you. I'll build you up. Will you come?"

He was all bluffness and kindness, and his praise uplifted me. Of course, I gasped out my delight. It was arranged that in November, as soon as father could spare me, I should travel to the city. A little timidly I spoke of Joe.

Mr. Worthen shook his head very decidedly. "No weaklings in my office."

Regretful, yet the prouder, I said no more. Joe would have to be satisfied with Mr. Collester.

CHAPTER XII

THERE was a natural heartlessness in my readiness to go to the city. Natural, because I was obeying the impulse which drives men to the attempt to better themselves. Besides, I was young. So, when the time came, I went with complete forgetfulness of the feelings of the others. I scarcely considered that at the farms we were a little community cut off from the world, where mother and Margery had no intimates, and where the habit of the men was to stay at home and attend strictly to business. The disappearance of one from such a small circle would make such a gap that even Cousin Lon was sure to miss me.

But I never thought it out then, nor did any of them tell me. Margery, for example, was quite inscrutable when I made my absurd farewell, at the thought of which I still grow uncomfortable. I went to see her, and took her with me on my return to our farm, walking on our only beaten path, the way between our two houses. I was excited as I thought of my future, my plans for which satisfied me so completely that I was very generous to those whom I was leaving behind.

"You must find the other two boxes," I said to her in perfect seriousness. "Finding this one has given me all the start I need. You and Cousin Lon

ought to have the rest of the treasure. So keep an extra-sharp lookout for it."

I wonder that she did not laugh in my face. Instead, she answered that she would be sure to; and when we stood at the pool she listened to what further I had to say.

"This is where I met Gertrude," I reminded her. "Do you know, I like this better than the double pine." We looked at the old giant where he towered at a distance, then down at the silver bottom of the spring. "I think these dancing sands, which always have their movement even in midsummer, and the overflow that keeps the pool clear of every leaf and twig that falls in, are more permanent than anything else on both our farms, even though the pine was well grown when the old pirate set this stone rim. Margery, you must meet me here when I come back, and I'll tell you all about my luck."

She promised that she would.

"And you must write me often," I continued, with my big-cousinly certainty. "No matter how busy I am, I'll answer every letter."

And she, who knew me so much better than I knew myself, never made me a prophecy of my indifference and forgetfulness! Instead, she offered to run over frequently to see mother, which I had not even thought of asking.

"Margery," I said, a little disturbed by this revelation of my thoughtlessness, yet still loftily kind, "you're a dear girl. And now, good-by."

Margery's hand was short and compact; it re-

turned my grip with its own frank pressure. And as her clear eyes looked kindly into mine, I felt the sudden knowledge that this was an event. The realization that this day finished my country life brought with it a doubt of the future, and a regret of the present, which for a moment surprised even my confidence, taking me aback. But any unwillingness to leave this sweet cousin, to venture from the shelter of the farm, was for myself alone, and so I quickly mastered it. With a manly voice I finished my farewell. Margery remained and looked after me, ready, each time I looked back, to smile and wave her hand.

Every man knows some woman who has seen his weakness. Lucky if she is as kind to him as Margery was to me.

Arguing (against knowledge) that, since father wanted me to go, my mother must do the same, and putting out of mind her dread of change, I took my leave of her very easily. In this I was aided by the slight vexation which I felt whenever she spoke of the city or of Gertrude. She seemed to think that they were harmful, whereas I knew that they were not.

So I went, smothering the knowledge that I left sore hearts behind me, and satisfying myself with resolutions to write often, and frequently to "run up" and see the family. The first resolve I kept badly, the second not at all. As any older man could have told me, and as I am able to assure all comers, regret repairs nothing.

Thanks to the Worthens, not only my living but also my acquaintance was prepared for me. For I had received a missive from Gertrude. It was an engraved invitation to a Mrs. So-and-So's dance upon an evening within a week of my arrival, and some strange hand had written in my name; but Gertrude had directed it to me, and on the lower margin had scribbled: "Best jeans, Binney, with all the fixings." Mother had explained to me the meaning of the letters R. S. V. P. In the same mail by which I wrote to Mrs. So-and-So I had also written to my good friend Mr. Dorset, begging him to have an evening suit ready for me to try on at my arrival. This was on suggestion of my mother, who added, out of her private hoard, funds for an overcoat. My burning eagerness to look well is shown by the fact that I went for my fitting straight from the train, even before I had looked up the lodgings to which Mr. Worthen had directed me.

As to my looks when once I got used to wearing the things, Gertrude later, in one of her captivating enthusiasms, told me that I carried my dress clothes well. I should have doubted this when in my room I wore them for the first time before the glass. The staring black-and-whiteness of the suit seemed to emphasize my bulk, especially since its snugness at the waist and hips made my shoulders unduly broad. There was a sleekness to it, also, which was strange to me. But most I was troubled by its utter absurdity, both in the absolute ridiculousness of its shape, and in its foreignness to the over-

alls which till just now had been my most familiar garment. And so sheepishly I turned away: there would be laughter at the countryman.

In the elegance and discomfort of this new togery I went to Gertrude's. The house was on Commonwealth Avenue, that street which I had heard of as the very centre of fashion. The soft-footed butler admitted me to the hall, and after respectfully memorizing my name, went away and left me staring at the amazing splendor of my surroundings. Rugs of rich coloring, such as I had read of but never seen, soft to the foot and delightful to the eye, lay on the floor of polished oak. Hangings at each door, pictures on the walls, gilt, glitter, warm and glowing colors everywhere—I was fairly dazzled for a moment.

A little laugh—and there was Gertrude peeping at me from between the curtains. She thrust out her pretty head. "I got ready ahead of time," she cried. "Do you know what that means, you miracle of promptitude? I wanted to see you when you saw this place. It's different from the country, Binney."

Different! A vision of our smudgy and low-ceiled kitchen, of its bare walls and floor, of the narrow and steep stair that led from it, rose in pitiful contrast to all this splendor. Here the wide flight gently mounted upward to a landing, then divided to the right and left, so that one might reach the upper story by either way. A soft and heavy carpet ran up the middle of the stairs. Fac-

ing me from above the landing was a great portrait of Mr. Worthen, at full length, frock-coated, carrying cane and gloves and silk hat, a burly black figure before a gorgeous red curtain. And at home our portraits were photographs or tin-types, taken at the Athol fair!

Then Gertrude emerged and overwhelmed me—her most brilliant self. For I saw her, for the first time, in all the splendor of her ball dress, and in spite of the brightness of her eyes, my gaze ran up and down her dazzling figure. A dress of pale green, draped with some shimmering tinsel, and belted with gold, yet with a narrow edging of dark fur at hem and at bust. Below, the dress trailed away in indescribable grace; above, there rose out of the rich fur the glory of her shoulders. Never before had I seen any one so costumed. Had she been a mere girl I must have admired; but she was Gertrude! The youthful curves of her shoulders and her throat, the hinted beauty of her bosom, the blushing satin skin—I drew a long breath. The witch had prepared this surprise for me, and was watching for its effect; but at the sight of my face the color came flooding to her very eyes. And some restraint, some barrier, broke between us. Our glances met and seemed to cling together. She was breathing quickly, and I knew that I was panting with the shock.

I might have stood long, stupidly staring; but she fumbled for words. "See," she stammered, feeling at her throat, where hung, on a threadlike

chain, a fiery jewel. "See—look. Do you remember, do you recognize this?" And she held it for me to see.

Obedient, I wrenched my glance from hers, and tried to bend it on the stone, a single ruby, simply set. "No," I answered. "Have I seen it before?" My eyes came back to hers.

"It was yours," she answered. "It is the stone you three were looking at when father and I came to your house, after you had opened the box. I loved it at once, the best stone of them all, and made father buy it for me. Doesn't it look well on me?"

She tried to be arch, but was still too much moved to speak airily. Her challenge faltered, and her gaze fell. And I rough, I impetuous, answered almost fiercely:

"*You* look well! You are beautiful! Gertrude, how wonderful you are!"

The language, though so tumultuous, was familiar enough to restore her to herself. "Oho! And we pretend to be a farmer, and to know nothing of compliments? Indeed!" So she fought away from me, and recovered herself, and rang for her carriage, and talked brilliantly until it came. One moment there was, when she gave me the wrap which I was to put upon her shoulders, when I thought her gaze again faltered before mine. But she turned to be invested, and her confusion passed. As for me, I was so dazzled by this vision of her, so drugged by her very atmosphere, that I fairly

stumbled after her to the carriage, and had not the wit to help her into it.

But oh, that first ball, and oh that first breath of the life that Gertrude lived! I had learned to labor through the waltz, mother and Margery having drilled me in the art. That was my only qualification for the party, beyond the fact that I was a curiosity, as the ploughboy who had found a fortune in a stone wall. My host and hostess received me with the frankest inquisitiveness, as one of whom they had heard and were anxious to see. I was introduced to many, and I doubt if there was a person in the room to whom I was not pointed out in the course of the evening. Gertrude managed some of the introductions to older people, and took note of the invitations that ensued. "There," she said to me toward the close of the evening, "three more parties, Binney. And do you know what every one is saying? That you don't look like a farmer. That's because of your straight back."

I think myself that it was because of her. So was I uplifted by her that I came triumphantly through the embarrassments of such an experience among strangers. Everything centred upon her. The music, the handsome people, the showy dresses, all served but to set off the liveliest, the gayest creature of them all. Not wine, but anger and women are likeliest to intoxicate me. That night Gertrude set a fire in my veins.

Few incidents remain to me from that confusion of shifting partners, scarcely a word to remember

and set down. But Gertrude? Never before, as seldom since, was Gertrude timid before me. And this I know, that the blush which flooded her cheek that night whenever called by the glances of our eyes, she could never counterfeit, nor could any woman. The quickened breath and heightened pulse which the dance itself did not summon—for like the others of her set, she was trained like an athlete—came and went in my presence. The spell was on us both.

It was not strong enough. "Let us walk home," said Gertrude, when in the early morning we went down the steps together. "It is only a few blocks." So I sent the carriage away, and off we went together in the moonlight, she with her bright uncovered head winsome above the white fur that enveloped her. There were others walking in our direction, and carriages streaming past, to which we called good-bys, so that I scarcely had a minute's talk with her until we stood together at the foot of her steps. I have wondered if she arranged it so that we should not be alone together in the carriage. But it was not the conventions that troubled her; she was one of those rare creatures that break them without blame.

She may well have been tired with the gayety, or she may have been simply afraid. Twice I have seen Gertrude lose herself before a situation, and—looking back—I know she doubted herself now. Certainly when I urged: "Let me come in with you a few minutes—just a few!" she laughed

a little breathlessly, awkwardly cried, "No, no!" and, waving her white-gloved hand, ran up the steps. She pulled the bell and disappeared in the vestibule.

But she blushed once more as she ran. I wonder what would have happened had I followed before the butler reached the door to let her in. Peering back through the frosted glass of the outer door, was she disappointed or relieved to see me still standing, dully looking up until I heard the inner door open and then close? For I was green and countrified, and had no courage to make the attempt. Bewildered, I took myself away, and so closed that thrilling experience.

Neither of us ever forgot it. Neither shall we ever forget that we shrank back from the height of our emotion. More credit to my courage, to her wisdom, had we trod bravely on together. But it was not love, not the true inspiration. For though I walked the streets for hours before I would go to my room, by day I found myself incredulous. And in the afternoon I went to see Gertrude, suspicious of her power over me, and curious to see if I could rouse her again. I found her on her guard, not defiant but unbelieving and cool.

From my first glance at her brisk manner as she came down-stairs, I learned that she was mistress of herself. Like the male brute that I was, I felt disappointment. "I am glad that you came," she said. "You don't begin with father till to-morrow?"

"No," I answered. "He said he had directors' meetings to-day."

She took me into the parlor. I came to know it well. The age of stuffed upholsteries was passing, but this room was reminiscent of it. There was a "suite" of sofa and chairs, there was a couple of odd fuddy-duddy stools, all more or less fringed and puffed. On the walls, above a panelled dado, was heavily embossed bright-patterned leather, on which hung pictures in shiny gold frames, mostly figure studies of folk in costume. The floor was covered by a vast pale rug, in the middle of which we stood facing. Gertrude's rich coloring was as striking as ever, but she was dressed very simply.

"Do you remember," she asked abruptly—and for the second time I saw the hint of purpose beneath her constant airiness of manner—"that in Petersham I asked you not to work for father?"

This was not what I expected. Heaven knows what I wanted, but it was not this. I must have thrown up my head like a skittish colt as I saw that she was deliberately returning to the subject.

"But, Gertrude!" I expostulated.

She came a little nearer. Her expression, though not as brilliant as the night before, was sweeter than I had ever seen it. Gertrude was doing this against her will. I could not see this then; I failed to recognize it as a proof of her kindness toward me that she overlooked my earlier stupidity, and asked her favor twice. She said:

"I ask it again. And I can't explain myself, Binney."

Never had she been gentler to me than then. And I thought she had forgotten the emotions of the previous night! That she might be thinking of my welfare did not occur to me. The big fact was that she was interfering with my management of my affairs. Between disappointment and resentment I flushed and stiffened.

"I have promised your father," I said.

"He will get over the disappointment," answered Gertrude a little dryly. Then, when I scowled, she hastened to say: "Binney, leave it to me to manage him." And in apology she touched my hand.

With shame I remember that I turned away and went to the window. Outside I saw nothing, for my mind was self-centred. "I mean to keep my promise," I replied.

"Won't you oblige me?" she asked.

I stated the bald terms of the proposition. "Oblige you by breaking my promise!"

"Then make me a promise," she required.

I turned: "What is it?"

"If anything goes wrong between you and father, you will come to me before you break with him."

This seemed to me highly unreasonable, for I did not perceive that she intended, in such a case, to manage him rather than me. "How can I be sure?" I asked petulantly.

"Then," said Gertrude, quietly persistent, "at least promise to consider consulting me. I might be able to help."

"Of course I'll promise that," I agreed, though

not with the best of grace. "Though why you expect——"

She came a little closer, interrupting by raising a forefinger. "Girls are strange, aren't they?"

We tailed off into small talk, and presently she had me in a good humor.

I know now that she had tested me, and I see how I failed. And so our great stirring of emotion, to which I look back with tenderness, and which showed Gertrude to me this day at her best, brought us nowhere but to the avoidance of a quarrel. I have wondered that Gertrude did not at once abandon me, yet after all there was now a bond between us. There never passed away from between us the memory of that divine evening. I represented something from which her nature was unwilling to part.

Our relations slipped back into flirting at the worst, mere comradeship at best. Under Gertrude's guidance I had stepped into the midst of a giddy whirl which soon became familiar. Curiosity kept folk interested in me until, since I did nothing absurd or disgraceful, I had established myself. A few more clothes, careful study of the men I met, a fairly close mouth, and some coaching by Gertrude, made me decently at home. Gertrude's training was done whole-heartedly, not always flatteringly.

"You don't enter a room right," she assured me frankly one day. "Yesterday at the Herrick's you had one hand in your pocket. You smiled too much."

"I was rattled," I pleaded.

"Get over it," she directed. "The whole room was not looking at you. And, instead of going directly to Mrs. Herrick, you came first to me."

"Irresistible attraction," I murmured, hoping to flatter.

But Gertrude frowned. "You don't suppose a girl wants to be made conspicuous, do you? Nor is pleased to have her friends show themselves countrymen?"

I felt like a mob of farmers, and swore to do better. This at least I can say of myself: She never needed to give me the same hint twice.

It was a wonderful world that she opened to me. People who had ballrooms, and carriages, and a bewildering profusion of money, speedily became, for me, the most important part of the population of Boston. There were girls in numbers; and I was drawn, willingly, into their gayeties. Before a month was over, my looking-glass showed a substantial decoration of invitations, and I knew my way to a dozen parlors. I could behave myself at a dinner, at the theatre, at a dance—I the farmer! I used to feel proud at my adroitness. Yet how often they must have laughed at me!

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN I reported at Mr. Worthen's according to appointment, I waited first in the outer office, and gawked about me on the sights and noises. Here were things entirely new. The little ticking glass-domed machines, always with their readers of the strips of paper that intermittently reeled themselves out into the baskets; the papers filed on hooks against the wall, with restless seekers flitting from one to another; men at desks sitting with their hats on, while other men talked with them in mysterious confidences; questions and answers in a strange vocabulary called across the office—all these filled me with curiosity and a pleasant anticipation. I looked with interest on those who seemed at home here; they might some day be intimates of mine.

Then I was called into Mr. Worthen's handsome private room, apart from the hum of the outer office. Here the walls were panelled with bright oak, the desks and chairs were of the same finish, the rug was of a strong red, the fireplace tiles were patterned in yellow and purple, and the gas-fixtures were very shiny. It all seems showy as I look back on it now, but to me it was sumptuous then.

Mr. Worthen, rising from behind his roll-top desk, shook hands with me, and then stood in front of the

fire. His bulky figure seemed very massive in its snug cutaway; his linen was very white, his narrow necktie brilliant blue, and his rings, as he shook out a faintly perfumed handkerchief, flashed red and green. Without loss of dignity he blew a blast of welcome.

"So here you are, Binney," he said as he looked me over. "Very sensible to wear good clothes. All my young men do."

I was a bit startled. The young men in the outer office certainly had put some thought into their attire; indeed, every one in the office, young or old, was noticeably neat, except for one man. But they all appeared to me rather flashy. My ideas, imbibed from Colleston and my tailor, were (except in riding-togs) all for modesty. Had not Mr. Worthen seen the difference?

"In fact," he went on, "I require it of them. Makes a good impression. Goes quite a way in the sort of thing that I want you to do. For I have a special field in view for you, Binney."

I was pleased, and said so. He nodded at me.

"Can't start you as a beginner," he said. "You're too proud, and you're really too good for it. You can't go on the curb; your dignity would never let you succeed there. I doubt if correspondence is your line, or desk-work of any kind. No, I must have you under my own wing. But first old Laycock must put you through his mill."

He reached out and touched a bell. "Yes, old Laycock hasn't had a beginner for some time; he's

generally too busy. But he must give his attention to you." A stenographer appeared. "Mr. Denny," said Mr. Worthen. "And then ask Mr. Laycock to come here." She went out.

"The young man whom I want you to meet first," said Mr. Worthen, "is one of my sharpest. You won't pattern yourself on him, because your minds work differently. He's the best curb operator in town, whereas you never could be half good at that. But he can show you things that Mr. Laycock, being married, would never think of." Mr. Worthen smiled knowingly. "Restaurants, Binney, and the theatres, and the way to a good time. You've got to know your way round."

This young man, appearing, proved to be some few years older than myself, tall, lean, smooth-shaven, and lantern-jawed. His clothes were light in color, almost summery in their effect; I found it to be his habit to wear a scarlet necktie and a malachite pin. The warmth of his welcome flattered me. He wound his long, thin fingers around my hand, and turned the hand sideways as he vigorously shook it. His head, too, was on one side for the ceremony.

"Boston is honored," said he. "A man who can pick diamonds out of stone walls is new to us."

Mr. Laycock came next, grizzled, bent, and sour. He was that sole member of the staff who was threadbare and a bit untidy. On being told that I was to be under his care he lowered at me as if the fault were mine. "I had hoped," he said, address-

ing me directly in a rasping voice, "that Mr. Worthen had stopped giving newcomers to me."

Denny, winking at me as my embarrassed eye wandered from the cold little orbs in Mr. Laycock's wrinkled face, tried to convey to me that the old fellow was more amusing than embarrassing. But Mr. Worthen, with much impressiveness, came and laid his hand upon my shoulder. "Laycock," he said, "this young man is a beginner, sure enough. But he's the most promising beginner that I ever had—so much so that I propose soon to take him in hand myself. You won't have him long; he's quick enough, I can tell you. So do your best with him."

Denny, losing his grin, seemed quite as much struck as I was confused by the formality and force of these statements. But Mr. Laycock did not lose his fixed acidity. "Well," he said, after a moment's scrutiny of his employer, "I hope the young man is willing to apply himself."

I assured him that I was. He took me out and sat me down at a desk in a recess, where he also was quartered, and whence I could see little that went on in the big office. There he gave me a newspaper article to read and digest, then set me to floundering amid figures. My absolute lack of preparation for the work being evident to him before half an hour was over, I believe that he went to Mr. Worthen and remonstrated, for I saw him go indignantly to the private room, and return disgusted. He never took any pains to conceal his

feelings. But Mr. Laycock's trials were no greater than my own. I was quite miserably confused. At lunch time, however, Denny came and carried me off, to refresh me.

"Of course it's, really a big advantage to you, your being with old Laycock." This he assured me when we were seated in a restaurant painted with scrolls and German lettering. It was my first restaurant, and I was innocently interested in it. "Laycock is the plodder, and keeps us all straight. Any mistakes that's found he sets to rights. If he takes to you he'll show you a good deal that it would take you years to learn anywhere else. Only," and Denny's yawn seemed roused by his subject, "it's mighty dull with him. He's so dry and precise. You're lucky to have the boss undertake to finish you off himself." Denny looked at me respectfully. "It's very unusual."

"He's so busy," I said.

"It's more than that!" and the clerk leaned forward impressively. "There are plenty of men that are busy—I'm busy. But there aren't many men that are big! Do you know how much money Worthen handles in the course of a month? Millions!"

"So much?" I was astonished.

"He's the biggest trader in Boston," cried Denny. "More shares are bought and sold through our office than anywhere else. And an operator! He takes his toll of everything that's going on. The others are afraid of him." Suddenly he paused

and scanned me carefully, his eager eyes suspicious. "You've heard some of the talk against him?"

"No," I answered, "nothing."

"Well, there is talk," admitted Denny defiantly. "But whose talk, and what kind? Envious slanders! Men are wrecked all the time, everywhere; you know that. Fools come to grief every day, through any office. So, of course, there are some that get smashed in ours. But that's their doing, not Worthen's. It's because people envy him his success that they talk against him."

"Human nature," I explained, out of my large knowledge. "He is successful?"

"Enormously," answered Denny. "Of course, it's a mighty expensive office to maintain. We advertise very freely, for one thing. Mr. Worthen writes big bulletins for the public almost daily; takes the public into his confidence, you know. Then our circulars, our mailing department, our travelling men, our telephone and ticker service. Yes, it's expensive. But it pays. Mr. Worthen goes after all the business there is—but I tell you he gets it!"

Denny's enthusiasm was striking. "You believe in him?" I asked, warmly sympathetic. I believed in Mr. Worthen myself, for reasons that this man could not know.

"He'll have nobody in the office that doesn't believe in him," answered Denny. "If you can't agree with him, make up your mind he'll find it out. Then out you go! He's masterful, he is. Don't

get to setting yourself up to know more than he does."

There was, I said, no fear of that. And growing confidential, I told Denny of the selling of our diamonds. He wagged his head, but was not at all surprised. His comment was: "If it's business, he'll buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest, for himself or his friends."

That afternoon, before I left the office, Mr. Worthen called me to him again. "Of course, you don't yet know whether you'll like it or not, but I hope the beginning was not too bad."

It had been perplexing and sudden, but I valiantly assured him that I should like the work.

"Binney," he said, "I haven't asked you what pay you want."

"Why," I stammered, "what I'm worth. What you'll give me."

He smiled indulgently. "You don't know your own value yet. Well, I'll set the price to begin with. Let's see how soon you come asking for a raise. What do you say to a hundred a month?"

For a boy who had earned, from his hens and his vegetables, a scant net hundred a year, the salary was princely. After deducting rent, board, and clothes, I should have endless spending money. Quite overcome, I suggested that the pay was too high. Hadn't he better wait till I had begun to earn?

Rising from his chair, Mr. Worthen slapped my shoulder. "Of course it's too high. I never started

a clerk at that salary before, and I never intend to again. You don't realize, Binney, that I expect you to be one of the cleverest salesmen I've ever had." I murmured that I could not see what made him think that. "Oh, never mind. But I'm not going to insult you by small pay. You'll be earning soon enough. There, drive away with Laycock for a few weeks, and I'll give you something worth doing."

I went away exalted. Such kindness, such pay, such a future, all combined to make me very happy. I thought the world of my employer—and then naturally began to think well of myself. Putting aside my wonderment at what he could see in me, I considered that he ought to know how to choose his men at a glance. And I was to be one of them—one of the best of them!

It was early in November when I began at the office, and for three weeks I worked hard with Mr. Laycock. Every morning we went over the stock-market reports carefully, studying especially the unlisted securities. Into the subjects which I studied I now know we did not go very deep, but the surface knowledge I gained very rapidly. He drilled me carefully in many little tasks, and so loaded me with my vocabulary, that in working hours I thought in no other. I was glib with the lingo of the street, so that Mr. Worthen, after testing me once or twice, commended me. It was not yet Thanksgiving when he took me out of Mr. Laycock's hands. I was delighted when, calling me to the office, he told me of his intention.

"After this you are to work for me, and me only. I intend to use you as a special messenger—my personal messenger. Do you know what that is?"

"After a fashion," I answered a little doubtfully. "Is it to carry securities here in the city?"

"No," he answered, and made me sit down. "I want to talk it out with you, my boy. I believe you're fitted for the work. But you shall judge for yourself."

He told me that all over New England, not only in the cities and towns but even in the villages, he had a good many scattered clients, forming a class of trade which he kept entirely in his own hands, not leaving it to others in the office. These clients were attracted by his advertisements, were mostly men of small means, and were after good securities. The certificates Mr. Worthen usually sent them by special messenger. Not that mail or express would not be safe enough, but there were two reasons for preferring the personal method. The first (and Mr. Worthen laughed good-naturedly as he told me) was that it made the purchasers seem a little more important in their own eyes.

"You can easily understand it," he explained. "When a good-looking, spruce young man delivers a package of certificates, it seems like a personal attention—makes the papers seem more valuable and the buyer feel a little more important, don't you see? Then the second reason. When a buyer is in that frame of mind he is likely to order something more, to prove his importance, especially if the young man is clever in soliciting."

I doubted my ability.

Smiling, he shook his big head at me. "Why, Binney boy, get a little confidence! When I've drilled you you'll be the best salesman I've got."

As I looked into his twinkling eyes I felt my powers grow. He was quizzical, alert, and able; he could go out on the street and sell a bunch of stock to the first man he met. He radiated self-reliance—and I absorbed it. I felt that this business could not be so difficult after all.

"There," he laughed, "I see that you're ready to tackle any one. Now let me talk to you." He fixed me with his eye, which now suddenly was keen and penetrating.

"This business of ours," he began with a new sharpness of tone, "breeds all kinds of enemies. You've heard the things they say against us?"

A thrill of sternness in his tones held my attention. His brows were bent on me, his glance was fixed; he was summoning the truth, even though his feelings might be injured. But had I had anything to question him about, his words, "ours—us," would have roused loyalty.

"Not much of it," I answered warmly. "People wouldn't venture to say much of it to me."

"Good!" he answered. "But you'll hear some of it from time to time, and I want to answer just a little of it now, at least concerning the kind of stock we handle most. Have you heard, Binney, that there are people so scared that they'll buy nothing that pays more than six per cent? Four and a

half is nearer their figure. Their cry is that anything higher is not safe, that it's wildcat speculation." He was still earnest, even a little stern, but suddenly smiled winningly. "You and I, Binney, know better than that."

I nodded, unwilling to speak, but full of certainty.

"They honestly believe it," he went on. "Don't bother about them; they're calamity howlers. They don't believe in the future of their own country. But, my boy, we're just opening up a period of prosperity such as the world has never seen. The splendid resources of this vast country are just beginning to be realized. Our West is one great territory of freshly explored wealth. Men who know how are extracting it by the bushel, and all they want is capital in order to get it by the carload. We, who can supply that capital, can reap rich rewards. The East helps the West, and gets not merely six, but ten and twelve and fifteen per cent—yes, and even more." He leaned forward, sinking his voice impressively: "Binney, I tell you that an investor with good judgment can double his capital in less than ten years!" He looked me straight in the eye.

I believed him. I have no heart to write much about it, but my confidence and loyalty were completely his. He went on:

"Some brokers make mistakes, and that is what gives mining and Western stocks a bad name. The brokers fail because they don't investigate, either

personally or by a reliable expert. Now, the stock I'm handling is of properties that I personally inspected on my trip last spring. Not a new stock have I put on the list since then, nor will I until I have sure knowledge of the property. Consequently I know that my clients can religiously rely on every word I tell them. They can't do anything better than take their money out of savings-banks and put it in my stock; by the time they have retired from business their nest-egg will be worth from three to five times as much as they could make it by their own methods. Ah, Binney!"—he drew himself up and sighed—"a business like mine, that permits a fellow to put these little investors on their feet, and at the same time forwards the development of this great nation, produces one thing, if nothing else—a good conscience!"

The comprehension of it mastered me. Out of one's knowledge to show the way to riches, out of one's strength to help the weak—that was worth doing! My emotions were deeply stirred as again I breathlessly nodded my agreement.

"Well," he resumed, slowly turning from his contemplation of the vision, "my plan is to use you in this work. You can see it's worth doing for its own sake. But it's interesting, too. These buyers are small merchants, or farmers, or even ministers. They'll treat you well. You'll have to travel over a good deal of eastern New England. The amounts you'll handle will seldom be very much at a time, but on the whole they'll make a pretty

good volume of business during the year. I'm making a good thing of it now, and I count on you to increase it. And now to your next step."

He told me that for a time I was to occupy a desk in his office, ostensibly as a sort of private secretary, to be called in whenever clients of this kind came to see him. Signals were to bring me to the room or send me from it; I was to seem busy, look wise, and take memoranda whenever called on. And I was to practise connecting names with faces.

Between the outer and inner desks, therefore, I gravitated for the next month. Attentively studying my patron's methods of puffing his wares, I caught his very phrases. I learned, too, something of the sort of man I was expected to handle. When I was in the outer office I still sat in Mr. Laycock's alcove, apart from the other clerks, with whom Mr. Worthen showed no desire that I should mingle, and from whom in consequence I held myself somewhat aloof, except from Denny, who maintained with me a decent friendliness. At this outer desk I spent my time conning the circulars which advertised our properties, and parroting their statements. I know I learned my lessons fairly well, for when at odd times Mr. Worthen examined me, he always praised me heartily. Then, little by little, he trusted me on the road.

CHAPTER XIV

DEEPLY as I respected the mission to which Mr. Worthen called me, I found the work not very difficult. After a very few weeks I was allowed to travel as I pleased to the slowly increasing number of clients whom Mr. Worthen put into my hands. The work was irregular. Sometimes I was in Boston for days at a time; then I would be away for a couple of nights, seldom for more. Presently I found that when I was not going on these special errands I was mostly my own master; Mr. Worthen and Mr. Laycock gradually ceased to assign me to office work. Even when I went to so near a place as Providence, from which I could return early, I was not expected to be at the office until next day. I found that I could always arrange my trips so as to be in Boston for any dance or tea. This all combined to give me a sense of security and self-importance that amounted to elation. I was not truly conceited, but I had an ever-present sense of the beauty and kindliness of the world.

This was strengthened by contact with my clients. They were all hard-working men of the shop-keeping or semiprofessional classes, of small income. To them thrift was a duty, and for it was

sacrificed all present comforts, in order to build up the future. Many of them had laid up comfortable little nest-eggs of five, ten, fifteen thousand dollars, secured in real estate, the savings-bank, and even the old-fashioned stocking—or so I suspected. Whatever they had gained had come by hard work and saving. These I understood very well, since until a few months they had been my portion; and the contrast between my ease and prosperity and the still difficult struggles of my clients confirmed me in my feeling of especial good fortune.

My dealings with them all were very similar. When I appeared I was always invited into privacy, if only into the store-room where we sat on nail-kegs. The certificates which I produced were then compared with a memorandum, frequently with a very keen scrutiny. Having been checked up, they were carefully buttoned away, the receipt signed, and then began the most important part of my mission—a little chat. I very soon learned that my clients were as eager for this as I was, and that all I needed to do was to wait until they asked me about the present state of the stock-market. Next I was sure to be asked what securities I recommended just then.

Now note how clever was the system which Mr. Worthen had drilled me in. It was my business to know the investments of each of my clients, and from the list to recommend one or two. Nothing was better calculated to please them than

this indirect assurance of the stability of their investments; they would smile and rub their hands over it. But on the principle, which every one of them perfectly understood, that eggs had best be kept in more than one basket, I would next be urged to think of some other stock. On my making a suggestion they would question me closely. I had figures at my tongue's end, circulars to produce, explain, and leave for study, and alternatives to present. Then at the end I sang the praise of Mr. Worthen. This was an important part of the whole interview, perhaps indeed essential.

For all of them knew my employer personally. On opening their accounts he had travelled to see them, and several of them approvingly told me of his severe inquiry into their finances. His real purpose is quite plain to me now; but the interviews always served to convince them that because he would trade with no one who could not pay his bills, so he also was absolutely reliable. And he was so bluff, so hearty, so businesslike, so sure of himself—they told me this in detail—that they were sure of him.

It was my task to maintain this feeling of security. "Business, Binney, my boy," he told me, "is rooted and grounded in confidence. In the general market it is the lack of confidence that brings about panics. In private trade nothing can be done without the knowledge that you can depend, not merely on the property of the man you're dealing with, but the man himself. It's simply a matter

of business, then, to keep these little traders sure of me. Otherwise, no matter how rich they might know me to be, not another order of theirs would I get."

So into each talk with a client I always interjected some account of my employer's present activities, his great interests, the absolute unshakableness of his credit. As both my clients and I believed firmly in these, this talk always made our confidence the stronger.

As my list of clients grew, I found among them a few country doctors, a couple of ministers, and even a self-educated lawyer, with half a dozen farmers; but their characteristics were all the same. Secretiveness, caution, eagerness to know that they were safe, and then a further venture—such was the course of each interview, or perhaps pair of interviews; for if I did not "land" my man after a talk of this kind I always followed him up in a week or more. It was seldom difficult to get the order, however small, for more stock. Indeed, our clients were rarely satisfied until all they had was in our hands.

Of this, of course, I could only approve, except for a tendency which developed in certain of them. When they were near the end of their capital, having put most of it into our investments, they developed a sudden desire to buy and sell on margin. This, of course, could be easily enough explained. Their two-and-a-half to four per cent investments had changed over into twelve to fifteen per cent

securities, a very wise process, yet in a certain remote degree resembling speculation—at least to them, for personally they could know nothing of the distant properties into which they had bought. So steadily were the dividends coming in that they were intoxicated with the increase of their incomes. But instead of being satisfied with this legitimate method of turning over their savings, with their last thousand they were only too likely to advance to buying on margin, a method which, however often it might bring in very large yields, I could never persuade myself was either safe or wise.

In vain Denny undertook to argue me out of this idea. Theoretically he could not meet me on my ground that a man's paper holdings had nothing behind them, so that, instead of being property, they might suddenly turn into an obligation. And practically he could not deny the fact that if one of our clients failed he was pretty sure to have been buying on margin. It was nothing less than stock-gambling. No, Denny had no argument.

Mr. Worthen tried to present none. "I've seen it many times," he said when I appealed to him for an explanation of the distressing symptom. "I guess it must be human nature, Binney, that a little prosperity makes a man greedy. Advise them all you please, they will take a flier now and then. All I can do is to try to make them moderate. Luckily they don't all take the fever."

Nevertheless, in my brief experience more than a quarter of my clients gradually passed out of my

hands into those of Mr. Worthen—for when they reached this stage he would let nobody handle them but himself.

I suppose that all this was never more perfectly illustrated than in the case of little Mr. Canby, Alpheus Canby, of Littlefield, Maine, a bird of my own bagging. He fell into my hands when, travelling on a local train, in the smoking-car, I observed him feeling in all his pockets, vexed and unhappy because he was out of tobacco for his pipe. I offered him a cigar, which he accepted after some hesitation.

"Sorry I have no pipe tobacco," I said. "I see you prefer it."

"It isn't that," he explained, in a voice as blond as his hair. A little, fair-complexioned, shrinking man he was. "I—I prefer cigars."

"But you don't smoke them?" I asked.

He seemed to find it proper to come and sit beside me. His mild blue eye was pathetically sincere. "They're too expensive," he confided simply. "But I suppose you"—he glanced at my spruceness, doubtless at the same time remembering how worn his coat was—"you can afford them."

But I saw that his clothes were very neat. "I haven't your handicap," I explained. "I'm still unmarried."

His simper indicated that he found me both clever and amusing. "Not only a wife but five children," he added. "But you're in a good way of business?" The inquiry came most naturally, and

I answered very freely. I was not unwilling to brag.

"With Walter W. Worthen!" he exclaimed, after staring. "But you look so young! His personal messenger!"

And so we were started. He had heard of us; he frequently read Mr. Worthen's flaring advertisements. The hint was enough for me. I left the train when he did; I went with him to his hardware store; I camped down on him until, late in the afternoon, I got his order for a thousand dollars' worth of mining stock. This I accepted on the understanding that Mr. Worthen might not be satisfied with my account of Mr. Canby's solvency, in which case, since I knew Mr. Worthen to be too busy to investigate Canby just then, cash would have to be sent before we could fill the order. With this Mr. Canby was quite satisfied. And in the joy of my first capture I went home and reported.

"Binney," said Mr. Worthen approvingly, "you're coming on."

He listened to my account of Canby's commercial standing, his unencumbered store and stock, his residence standing in his own name, his four first mortgages on local property, and his three savings-bank books. "Very good," said he at last. "Binney, you must take responsibility soon, and might as well begin. I'll leave this Canby to you."

I was inflated with self-importance.

Once Mr. Canby began, his orders came pretty fast. I felt particular pleasure in filling them, gave him much time and my best advice, and felt him as a responsibility of my own. I felt the joy, which my employer had earlier spoken of, of helping the struggling man of thrift.

On his part he was very thankful. He had in his office a safe, into which he always locked my packet after he had verified its contents. Yet he would always linger over the certificates, attractively engraved in greens and browns, strongly suggestive of government paper. Invariably he expressed his satisfaction that his savings-bank interest and his slow mortgages were being thus transformed into securities that gave such quick returns. And while he locked the certificates away he always looked at them with a sort of thankful reverence which, when once I had got a glimpse into his life, it was not hard to understand. They represented the future of his family.

On one of my visits I was taken to his house to lunch. I met fragile Mrs. Canby, and five young Canbys who made on me a uniform impression of flaxen hair and red cheeks, with not very intelligent countenances. In this they resembled their father, and, like him, they were small. It was while conducting me to my train that Mr. Canby showed me his heart.

"When a man has so much to be responsible for," he said, "he has got to work for the future."

I agreed.

"My business," he went on, "pays me fairly well so long as I watch it and work at it. From seven in the morning till six at night, quite as long as any of my clerks."

"That," I smugly stated, "is the way to get ahead." My own hours were from nine till four.

"I hold my own," replied Canby a little gloomily. "But two hardware stores are almost more than this town can support." Then he cheered somewhat. "You have opened to me such a promising future. A lucky accident that we met; I am sure that otherwise I should never have ventured—Now my income is considerably larger."

"And your position," I reminded him, "is quite as safe as before." He listened, gratified, to my praise of our securities. I particularly mentioned those which he held. And Mr. Worthen's name was behind them all—on that we both reposed in safety. Mr. Canby was by this time extremely cheerful.

"My wife is in poor health," he said, "and my children are young, but at any rate I can feel that their future is provided for."

Then he fell silent, but I could understand why presently he hummed a few bars of the Portuguese hymn. That was a part of my bringing up, and I believed I knew what line was in his mind. "What harm can befall with my Comforter near?" His devout thankfulness touched me, so that in spite of my recollection of a dull and meagre lunch I thought of him frequently, and willingly gave my

time to his affairs. And from now on I understood his almost religious joy in receiving my papers.

But there came a time when he troubled me. I took my worry to Mr. Worthen. "I don't know how it got into Mr. Canby's head, sir, but he seems to have the same idea as the rest of them. He asked me to-day about buying on margin."

Mr. Worthen looked at me fixedly. "And what did you tell him?"

"I advised him against it." Indeed, I had argued with the little man most earnestly.

"And why?" asked Mr. Worthen, amused. "Did you expect to stop him?"

"I have stopped him," I declared.

"For the present," he rejoined. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him it wasn't safe," I answered. "And I pointed out that he ought to be satisfied. His income from his savings is multiplied by four. The value of his principal is increasing regularly. All he has to do is to sit still."

"He won't," said Mr. Worthen. "Of course it's very nice of you, my boy. And now that you've given him your advice, don't let it worry you if some day he breaks away from it. It doesn't mean that he'll ruin himself, you know."

The order from Mr. Canby to buy for him, on margin, one of our highest-flying stocks, came to me at the end of a week. Rather sadly I gave it to Mr. Worthen, who himself took over the account, while I struck the name off my list. I was re-

luctant to give little Canby up. "You see," I explained, lingering at the door of the private office, "I'm specially interested in him. I have felt like a sort of trustee for him, as if he were a minor and needed my care."

Mr. Worthen looked at me sympathetically. "You are a good lad," he said. "But trust me, Binney. I'll try to keep him from any foolishness."

So I forgot Mr. Canby for a couple of months.

None of my trips took me in the direction of home. East and south of Boston was my field. It had chanced that on Thanksgiving Day I could not get away. At Christmas Mr. Worthen, with many apologies, sent me to Maine, so the best I could do was to write a letter home. But writing never came easy to me, and I doubt if my short and jerky letters were any satisfaction at the farm.

In my travels I saw a good deal of what I considered the world. I became familiar with railroads, parlor-cars, even with sleeping-cars. The simple monotony of the journeys did not pall on me, and I executed my tasks with a vigilance and seriousness that would have greatly amused the cigarette-smoking youths who daily carried on the streets of Boston packages many times more valuable than mine. But Mr. Worthen had very well drilled me for my mission. I was a little apostle of good finance; believed in him, in myself, and in my job; and was accordingly well content.

It was a period of silly satisfaction. So green was I that even to travel in trains was a pleasure, and in my free hours, which were many, I thought of little except indulgence. I had plenty of acquaintance to help me pass the time. Some of them I met through Gertrude: for example, a number of Harvard lads, whose assurance and familiarity with their life of ease and gayety made them seem quite as old as I. But the young business clerks whom I met at parties, and whose ways of life were more like mine, were those with whom I principally forgathered. With the men of our office I was not at all in touch, except with a little circle of Denny's, men of no social pretensions, but who occasionally showed me about the town. They thought themselves very rakish, yet all of us were curiously innocent.

And I was so bound up in my own narrow self, so pleased with the newness of everything that I heard or saw or experienced, that I enjoyed myself thoroughly. My Boston life was, of course, the best of it. What with lunching or dining or supping, going with girls to theatres or parties, or lolling with men in their smoke-obscured bedrooms, I was in a sort of fever of pleasure.

I believe that I had at this period some few unselfish thoughts: witness my regret at Mr. Canby's falling off. Nor was I ever, in a certain sense, truly selfish. I was full of generous impulses, love for the world, affection for my friends. But I was dazzled with the joyousness of this new life.

If my account of myself is incomplete at this stage, it is because I look back on it with hatred and shame. No man likes to remember that he has been a fool.

CHAPTER XV

ON a fair morning I met Joe in the street and pinned him before, with a shy greeting, he could hurry by. "I haven't seen you for weeks," I said. "How have you been all this time?"

"Entirely well, and prospering," he answered, embarrassed and pleased at my notice of him. Indeed he did look well, with his former lankness lessened by good living. He wore better clothes than he had used, and I affably rallied him on being a dandy. He wriggled and stammered and blushed. Joe never forgot that I had rescued him from bondage with Stidger—nor did I, looking at the difference in him, forget it either. A good lad, Joe.

"You're filling out," I told him. "Good food, eh?"

"I've just moved," he explained, "to a better boarding-house."

"Ah," I warned, shaking my head at him, "beware the curse of luxury, Joe. We'll have you at the theatre next."

He was embarrassed. "Oh, I go sometimes."

"What, comic operas?" I demanded. "Or perhaps the ballet, or vaudeville." All of these, already so familiar to me, I myself had not seen until within these few months.

"No," he explained earnestly. "Only the good plays." His eyes shone. "They are wonderful! Wasn't Marlowe fine in Shakespeare?"

Now I hadn't seen Marlowe in Shakespeare, and felt self-reproach at having wasted my time on the others. But I would not acknowledge it. "Improvement is the thing," I said. "Do you study?"

"Only law," answered he.

"Law?" I cried. "Does Mr. Collester find time to teach you?"

"Oh, no," explained Joe, horrified at the thought of such condescension in his employer. "I go to an evening class, three times a week."

"That is right," I said, recovering myself, and glad to patronize the attempt. "Keep it up, Joe. What sort of office work do you do, anyway?"

"I have had a wonderful chance," he explained. "Mr. Collester prefers a man stenographer; he kept a kind of secretary who fell ill just when he was most needed. And there was nobody else at hand, so I—I have been doing the work for some weeks now."

"You know shorthand?" I asked, in wonder.

"Oh, yes," answered Joe, as if a little surprised that I should ask the question.

And he, I reflected, as quiet as a mouse, but already well-advanced in Collester's office. "Good pay?" I asked.

"Very generous," he answered earnestly. "I never expected to have so much money for years."

I refrained from crushing Joe with the tale of

my own two hundred a month. "Oh," I said, "money comes easily in the city. Well, Joe, I must be going. So long!"

"Good-by," he answered, smiling. I liked to leave him with his face so bright. It made me feel that I had done good to somebody.

I heard of Joe again that day. "There's the oddest chap in my boarding-house," said Denny to me. "Shy as a girl. Blushes when you speak to him. He's taken the little room under the roof. Says he knows you, and asked me a lot about our business."

I found that this was Joe; but my first thought, that he could not afford the quarters and food of which Denny bragged so much, gave way before the remembrance of Joe's new prosperity. I felt a little guilty that up to now I had not looked into his way of living. Surely I had some responsibility for him. I felt a momentary impulse to go to Col-lester and inquire how the boy was doing.

Then I decided not to go. Joe had declared that he was doing well, and his appearance bore him out. And why should I go to Col-lester? The man had not bothered about me; he had never asked me to call on him. Not that there was any reason for his paying attention to me; I was not hurt by his neglect. Indeed, I seldom thought of him, except to be glad that he had ceased to hang about Gertrude. I never met him at her house, and so far she had never spoken of him.

All this was preliminary to a sudden meeting.

That afternoon I went to Gertrude's about five, as I often did; and since the butler told me that she was in the parlor I went directly thither, without laying off my coat. The frosty air had set my blood to tingling, and I wanted more exercise. So I entered with a "Gertrude, put on your things and come for a walk!" Then I saw Collester.

He was all precision and perfection of appointment, in cutaway, gray tie, carnation, patent leathers. When I think of the ideal city man I think of him. He was no dandy, for his clothes seemed to grow upon him; but he knew by instinct what to wear, and what shade of manner to assume. He seemed the natural product of the place.

He rose and greeted me. Made alert by finding him there, I was a little jealous of his manner, ready to find in it something of coolness or superciliousness. But I had forgotten the odd fact of his earlier friendliness. He was entirely cordial, smiled kindly, shook hands willingly. But then, turning to Gertrude, he said that he must go.

"Go?" returned Gertrude calmly, and without moving. "You have just come." She bade me make myself at home; she was not interested in walking just then. Sitting very demurely, and dressed more soberly than usual, Gertrude was unusually quiet and contained. I wondered if she had prepared herself for him.

Collester, saying nothing more of going, sat down again; I slipped off my coat, and we chatted. It was interesting to find that in spite of myself I

did not object to his company. While men of my own age, especially of the Harvard brand, whom I found calling at Gertrude's, usually exasperated me, so that in consequence my manners were aggressive, Mr. Colleston simply made me attentive. And this was because I recognized that he was there for a purpose.

Of course he was. Why else should a man of his age (and again I speculated on it) be there at all? He knew what life meant for him; he knew what he wanted. I saw it in his deliberate manner, his steady and determined eye. I knew that Gertrude saw it, too. Naturally the situation demanded attention.

We may have talked for an hour, but only once did we come near anything of importance. "Where have you been all winter?" I asked him. "I have seen you at none of the parties. Don't you care to go?"

He answered that he had been out very little. I hold it a special mark of decency that he did not laugh at me. It was Gertrude that did so after he had gone.

"Binney," she demanded, "why did you ask him if he doesn't go to parties?"

"Why shouldn't I?" I returned. "Does he go? I haven't seen him anywhere."

She was smiling oddly, for her mouth, which could be so friendly or so winning, curled unkindly, while the pretty nose drew downward in a little sneer. "He goes," she said, "to the parties of his set."

I realized that she meant to mortify me, but did not understand. "His set?"

"*The set*," she answered shortly. Seeing that I was still in the dark, she added: "You don't suppose, Binney, that you move in Boston society?"

I was entirely confused. "Don't I?" I asked. "You—your friends—" I saw that I was not very clear, and tried to explain by adding: "The Back Bay."

Gertrude laughed at me, not cruelly but bitterly; I felt that she included herself in her amusement. "Oh, Binney, the Back Bay is very big, and the inner circle is very small!"

Her tone showed that my horse was not galled so much as hers. "What of it?" I demanded boldly. "Is there half so much fun in the inner circle as outside?"

After speeding her shaft she had drooped, but now she roused herself. "Of course we have the best of it!" she cried, and sprang up. Her eyes as well as her lips were smiling now. "Oh, is it too dark for a walk? Let's go out!"

Out we went, and tramped in the dusk toward the sunset, which can be lovely on that same Back Bay. And Gertrude was charming in her fur jacket, and in the little toque which kindly revealed the curls at her forehead. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks glowing, her lips like a scarlet bow, her teeth the finest pearl. Of many girls that we passed, the same, doubtless, might have been said; but I had eyes for none of them, for Gertrude was more

than pretty: she was joyous and gracious. We chattered ceaselessly; we walked miles, and on our return, Gertrude insisting that I stay to dinner, we satisfied our furious appetites at the table where her father watched us inscrutably, vouchsafing few words.

Colleston was mentioned, and Mr. Worthen roused himself. "Here to-day?" he inquired. "Hm! Pretty regular, ain't he?"

Pretty regular at the house, and for three months I had been in and out and never met him? I took that away with me for wonderment.

As I thought it over I concluded that our not meeting might be accidental. But what became of my assumption that Colleston had dropped out of my life, except in so far as related to Joe? Plodding along, was he, not far behind?

Belonging to another set, also! Exclusive Boston retained its citadel, of which I knew nothing? Well, that troubled me not at all. I had not come to Boston for society.

But what had I come for? Business, and I was getting it. Had I come for Gertrude also? Why else was I hanging about her? I shuffled away from the question; a young man likes to let such matters lie. But I shuffled back to it shamefacedly; the recollection of Colleston forced me to it. Love? Marriage? The emotion of that earlier evening with Gertrude had already dulled. Matters were exceedingly well as they were.

But what did Gertrude think of the situation?

What did she feel toward Colleston? Toward me? How strong was her desire to enter Boston's exclusive set? Could I keep her from it?

Did I wish to?

Surely here were problems forced upon me. Meanwhile at my room I found letters from home. Mother was well, and father, and Margery; there were new calves and colts, and Peter was becoming quite a steady roadster; father was getting high dividends from Mr. Worthen, and enclosed me a share of them, with his love.

For once I sat down and wrote a good letter home.

CHAPTER XVI

I LIVED in my fool's paradise a surprising length of time. It was November when I went to the city, and not till late March did anything disturb me. I was entirely satisfied. Having the great advantage of intimacy with Gertrude, I learned naturally—through my pores, it seemed to me—all the little usages of society. And that it was but second-class society never troubled me. It was wholesome, it was joyous, and what more could one want? So natural did such an attitude seem to me that I was surprised to detect a different one in Gertrude. She took me, one day, a little out of our shortest course—I was escorting her to a tea—and walked me down the waterside of Beacon Street, not far from Brimmer. "There," she said suddenly, "the third house ahead of us, with the high brown-stone steps—what do you think of it?"

It was a double house, plain but dignified. "It reeks of money," I told her. "But it's money of the third or fourth generation." I had advanced far beyond the stage when, for the first time, I had attempted to understand Cousin Lon's house, since now the very period of this one was plain to me, belonging to a style gone by.

"Isn't it solid?" asked Gertrude. "Isn't it respectable? Do you see how it avoids show? No color, ornament, anything! Wouldn't you know it sheltered one of the elect?"

"Go to the head," I commended. "But Gertrude, why such emphasis? You speak as if you had a grudge against it."

She looked at me, out of those brilliant eyes of hers, with a whimsical fierceness. "It keeps me out," she said. "Don't laugh, Binney. It means something to a woman."

I stopped at the foot of the steps. "Say the word, and I'll break into it."

"Crazy!" she cried. Really vexed—she who was ready for most foolishness—she urged me forward. "Behave yourself, Binney! If they should look out and see you!"

"They don't know us by sight," I returned. "Where is the harm? Do you even know them?"

"I do know them," she asserted. "It makes me mad that they don't know me."

"Make them," I advised her. "Climb, Gertrude. Make a stepping-stone of me. Here is a house much like the other. Perhaps it will be easier to enter."

She looked at me oddly. "It is," she replied in a lowered voice wherein I perceived some vibrant feeling. "I have been asked to tea there. Don't you know it's Mr. Collester's?"

Collester's! Well, it fitted him exactly. Reserved, but not quite prim; cold, yet with a hint

of internal warmth. I was very curious about it, and looked at it carefully. "When was your tea?"

"It wasn't," she answered dryly. "I refused."

"And so the tea was given up," I inferred. "Tut, tut, Gertrude! Don't abuse your power."

"He said his sister would be there to meet me," explained Gertrude, very short. "That's a man's way of overlooking things. But I don't go there till she first calls on me."

"Did you tell him that?" I inquired. "And has she called?"

"I did not tell him," she said with emphatic brevity. "She has not called."

"The end," I added.

But she looked at me with a flash of defiance. "Who knows?"

"Gertrude," I said, "I suspect in you much greatness of mind. You may yet overcome her. She lives with him?"

"Don't you know anything?" demanded Gertrude bluntly. "She is Mrs. Brewster Brewster! Her house is on the Avenue. I consider that I've been half introduced to her. She thinks it only a quarter—and so we don't bow."

I took a last look at Colleston's house, and we went on to our tea. There for a while we lost each other in the confusion, until finally I saw Gertrude making her way toward me. A popinjay was following her, but she sent him back. I saw that her brow was bent in a frown, her eye fixed on me; and so, disengaging myself as soon as possible

from the nobody to whom I was talking, I turned to her. She had ensconced herself in a window recess, and was looking upon the crowded room with haughty aloofness.

"Chain up the lightning," I said in her ear. "What has gone wrong?"

Gertrude did not relax her fixed position. "She is here," she said.

"Who?" I asked blankly. I had forgotten our talk.

She turned upon me fiercely. "His sister," she exclaimed in exasperation. "She is in the other room. I stood near her—oh, for ten minutes. She paid me no attention at all. But she knew I was there." Gertrude stood tense, tapping with her foot.

I mocked flippantly. "Let us fly the place! Mount Auburn Cemetery for us!"

"Unkind!" Her eye flashed dangerously, then became reproachful. "And I thought you would understand!"

"I do!" I cried, repentant as I realized that she had sought me for consolation. "Forget the homely old grandee, Gertrude, and come away with yours truly."

"Homely old grandee!" Gertrude was suddenly gleeful. "Here, let me show you." She dragged me to the other room, stationed me in an alcove, and then, on tiptoe, searched the crowd. Her eyes danced with fun. "There, do you see, by the coffee-urn, the pink hat? She's the one!"

I saw a beautiful and graceful creature, younger than Collester, still almost girlish. "Homely old grandee!" whispered Gertrude in my ear. "Look out, Binney! She sees us."

So I had become aware. By some means I knew that by some means she knew that Gertrude and I were there together. But when she lifted a slow gaze to us we were looking elsewhere, and I doubt if she suspected. She was deliberate in her survey. "Won't she look away?" whispered Gertrude.

"Let me get you some coffee," I said.

On my way to the urn I passed our bugbear. She looked up at me, I down at her. How calm and self-possessed her gaze! She was like Collester, round-faced, short-chinned. But she had a mouth of command. "Gertrude," I said when I returned, "she won't call on you. Not yet."

"Let us go home," answered Gertrude. "I have forgotten her already."

When we were out in the glorious fresh air I said a few fatherly words about the worthiness of one's ambitions. Gertrude declared that she didn't know what I was talking about. We wandered away together, and I—I forgot the circumstances!

I forgot them entirely. It never occurred to me to wonder at the impulsive frankness with which she revealed the sentiments which another girl would have concealed from me. Nor, except to remark to myself that they seemed a weakness, did I think upon the sentiments themselves. Yet both of these peculiarities, as showing her char-

acter and as indicating her future, meant something to me. I was shallow, very shallow, as I proved when Joe endeavored to warn me of another matter.

One evening when I returned from the theatre I found him waiting in my room. He was sitting nervously on the edge of a chair, holding his hat.

"Why didn't you smoke?" I asked. "Here are plenty of pipes, and there's the tobacco. And you could have been amusing yourself with those books."

He explained that he didn't think—that he never supposed—that he'd just dropped in—in short, he had just run over to see me. But I, knowing that he would never have come except for a purpose, told him to spit it out, or cough it up, or words to that effect, whatever was the slang of the day.

Joe grew very red, but presently said that he enjoyed his work. I interrupted—was he still private secretary? Yes, the other fellow was not coming back, and Mr. Collester seemed satisfied. Then poor Joe had a sad time in getting back to his original starting-point, that he enjoyed his work.

Of course, he went on, it would be years before he could be a real lawyer, but still, taking it up in his evenings though he did, the study of law was a fine one—a—a manly one; it—it taught a fellow how to take care of himself.

I agreed. But still the law was very dry.

At this Joe, stammering again in his eagerness, protested. It was sometimes obscure, until you grasped the underlying principles. But these were so grand, so simple!

I laughed. Business was grand and simple also. At any rate, I preferred it.

Joe was sorry to hear me say this, because—because—well, because there was a vacancy in Mr. Collester's office, and it would make him happy if I would take it.

I said I wouldn't decline it—Joe's face brightened—because it hadn't been offered me. And Joe's face fell.

Perhaps, he said, he had managed it wrong. But he had asked Mr. Collester, and Mr. Collester had said that he would be very glad, and Joe had begged permission to bring me the offer.

"My dear Joe," I said, "it's very good of you both. But really I'm not suited for the work. I'm not at all interested in the law."

The legal side, Joe explained, in this case was not at all prominent, except that I would be bound to pick up a good deal. The work had more to do with the management of property—moneyed property.

"But, my dear Joe," I protested, "don't you see that's just what I'm in Mr. Worthen's office for?"

He went on doggedly. "Mr. Collester has a big investment business. Trusteeships, you know; no office in Boston is better spoken of. The new clerk will be put at the detail of it. There never was a better chance to get ahead."

I liked, I told him, his interest in my advancement. I was glad to know that Mr. Collester was a

financier (I used the word), and that he stood so high. But work of that sort was just what I was doing. I was daily studying investment securities, and in a bigger office.

Joe became scarlet, and blurted: "The standing of the two offices is different."

I asked him to explain.

It must have cost Joe a great effort, younger as he was and under the obligation of gratitude to me, to set himself against my ideas. But manfully he tried. "Mr. Worthen," he said, "deals almost entirely in unlisted stock. He hasn't a seat on the exchange."

I replied with the phrases current in the office. "When he has handled his stock a little more, it will be listed fast enough. And as for a seat on the exchange, he doesn't need it. He has more freedom."

"Freedom!" interrupted Joe eagerly. "Freedom from the old rules long established for safety. Do you know that some people call Mr. Worthen's office a bucket-shop?"

"Jealousy, my dear Joe," I said. "We're quite used to that. No, no, my boy; I know what I'm doing."

He was ready to overflow with arguments; but I corked them up and sent him away—for I yawned in his face, and he went apologetically. As I undressed I laughed at his earnestness. Joe's little world was very big to him.

Yet I thought of him the next day. Chance

took me to where the struggling mass of noisy clerks shouted on the curb and exchanged their cabalistic signs with those above them in the windows. I knew that we maintained a force of clerks specially for this work, and that Denny was their head. As I paused a minute to watch, I caught his eye. The light of battle was in it, and had transformed the quiet clerk into a howling dervish whose yells rang in the street. In spite of the cold, his jacket was open, and sweat stood on his forehead. When he saw me he winked, waved a hand, roared an offer, accepted a bid, and forgetting me, telegraphed upward. I went on my way.

Now I was vexed. It made me wince to think that Joe, once my protégé, from the height of the impeccability of Collester's office could look down on our perfectly legitimate methods of training. Of course, this curb business of ours was undignified. Of course, and I found myself sneering—those of the inner social circle would have nothing to do with it. But there was nothing wrong with it. And Collester's methods were hopelessly old-style. Poor Joe! He knew nothing outside his own experience. And, pitying him, I grew cheerful again.

That day I received a note from Collester. He had no desire to tempt me away from a satisfactory arrangement, but the offer which Joe brought me he would be glad to confirm. The opening might not be such as I had reason to desire, but he would be pleased to have me in his office.

I declined, likewise by note, and politely. I

was really not tempted, for I did not wish to work under him, nor to receive favors from him. And it seemed to me that to leave Mr. Worthen would be ungrateful.

CHAPTER XVII

SPRING was coming. In the Public Garden, through which I so often passed on my way to Gertrude's, the first tulips were in bloom. The grass was green on the Common, and overhead the elms were feathering out. Said Denny to me: "Baout time ye got the team aout an' ploughed the lower medder?"

"Up kentry," I answered, "the frost ain't rightly out o' the ground. The lower medder ain't dry enough to hold a hoss. But I suppose my father will plough the north meadow in a fortnight or so. And he'll watch, over in the east corner, for little shiny things that the plough may turn up."

Denny was familiar with the story. "Binney," he wheedled, "let's you and me go up and plough the field ourselves."

"Both of us?" I asked. "You must think me a mighty poor farmer if I need help."

He explained that he would walk behind and watch.

"So that I," I remarked, "would have to watch both the ground and you!"

"You're too suspicious," answered he. "I should hate to think as mean of human nature as you do. But don't you want to get out in the furrow once more?"

The idea was very unwelcome. Old clothes and dirty, hard hands, lame back, dull evenings: these were what I should find in the life that once was so happy. The old pleasure in it could never return. The new had blotted it out.

Yet the suggestion somehow clung to me. I met a farmer in the street, and the very gait of him took me back to the ploughed field. Finding myself near the North Station, I stopped to watch, from the opposite side of the street, the people who came streaming from it. They were from the country; many of them were from the soil. And I thought of the time when I had first faced the city from those portals.

Standing and staring, lost in thinking of my rawness and my transformation, I was suddenly brought to myself by the sight of familiar figures. A girl had come out of the station; a man, waiting by the curb, had started forward to meet her. He raised his hat, took her bag from her, and conducted her toward a waiting carriage. And I knew them both—Collester and my cousin Margery!

For a moment I stood watching; then I, too, started forward. He was putting her in the carriage, and they both were concealed by the vehicle, when I began to doubt. Margery in Boston? Impossible! And met by Collester? Why? Surely I had been mistaken. A great dray coming in front of me, I made no effort to cross before the horses, but stood and let it pass, while I revolved the problem. There was no reason in it. Yet the man had

been Collester, and why should I doubt that it was Margery, too? It must have been she. As soon as the conviction re-established itself, therefore, I circled behind the dray, and hurried for the sidewalk. The carriage was darting smartly away, and I stood gazing after it.

Was it Margery? Was it even Collester? The carriage was a private turnout, but since I had never seen his, the fact did not help me. By turns I doubted and was positive. The idea seemed nonsense; but when it turned again to sense I was angry to suppose that Margery would come thus secretly to the city, accepting the help—for surely she came for help—of some one else than me, her cousin.

While I stood fuming, finally becoming quite as vexed by the uncertainty as by my suspicions, I became aware that some one near by was watching me. And there, absolutely the same as ever, in threadbare coat, scrubby beard, and sharply looking out of red-rimmed eyes, was Stidger.

His presence did not surprise me, but it added to my irritation. "Are you here, too?" I demanded.

But he was busy in studying me. "My!" he snarled, "ain't we fine! Quite the young gentleman! We belong in the city!"

"Did you come in her train?" I asked.

"A pearl scarf-pin," he sneered. "A flower in his coat. Gloves!" The last touch seemed to bring an explosion of his scorn. "Dude!"

"Did you come in her train?" I insisted.

Suddenly aware of my question, he turned on it with craft. His little eyes narrowed. "Her train? Whose?"

He roused my caution. "Oh, well," I answered, now as anxious to draw back as he was to engage. "Apparently not."

"Whose train?" he urged. "Who's come to town?" And in his manner appeared his readily aroused exasperation. To be met with stupidity, resistance, or evasion, he never could bear.

Thus after our six months' separation we stood opposed, exactly as when last we met. I seemed born to anger him; he always roused repulsion in me. Nevertheless, instinct reminded me, as it had told me at our first meeting, that the way to make him maddest was to show indifference. Cool superiority would be even better. So I ignored his question.

"And how is Athol?" I inquired. "How is the busy little valley among the hills? Still awake?"

I certainly touched him, for he flushed and scowled. But I had given him too good an opening.

"Athol is awake," he snapped. "And Petersham is asleep —as it always is."

And he turned and left me. As I thought it over, I concluded that he had had the best of me.

I suppose he went straight to the office because he saw me so far away from it. He may even have watched to see me continue on my way in another

direction, a reasonable assurance that I would not be soon at the office again. But I returned within the hour, and when I was once seated at my desk in the outer office I recognized Stidger's back as he left Mr. Worthen's private room.

So he was one of our clients! The idea struck me at first as natural, for on my own list I had buyers who were quite as odd as he. But none, I presently reasoned, whose credit was so shaky. As I pondered the matter I concluded that I had here a duty to Mr. Worthen, so that impulsively I went to discharge it.

I had no longer a desk in the inner office, but Mr. Worthen was usually accessible. He received me affably; but when, clumsily opening, I abruptly said, "I didn't know that Mr. Stidger dealt with you, sir," he eyed me with a sudden coolness, as if for a moment he hesitated to acknowledge trading with the man. Then he asked:

"Well, what of it?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Worthen," I stammered, taken somewhat aback. "I didn't mean to interfere, sir. But I thought you ought to know that his reputation isn't good, up our way."

He relaxed. "Oh, can't he pay his bills?"

"He lives very small, sir," I explained. "He's always being turned out on account of not paying his rent. So I have heard from my father."

He appeared to decide to take me into his confidence. "Why, Binney," he said, "the man's a skinflint, that's all. He's the sort that scrapes

and saves till he gets enough to take a flier with me. Then he takes it."

"I see, sir," I replied. "I didn't understand. I beg pardon for interfering."

"Why, you only did your duty," he answered, now again smiling cordially. "That kind needs watching, and I like all the information I can get. But Stidger's safe so long as I look after him myself. He's the sort I allow nobody else to handle." He paused for my departure, then asked as I lingered: "Anything else?"

"Nothing," I replied, presuming a little upon his kindness to me, "except that it's wonderful how many of the queerest people come to you, sir."

"Nothing's queer in my business," he said. And then his face of astonishment gave him the lie. "Why, Gertrude!"

I whirled about. Gertrude at the office! But there she was, in a charming spring dress that gave an indescribable effect of freshness. It was as if a newly opened flower were walking. Behind her the clerks were staring. She was nodding to us jauntily. Delightful to see her there, dainty and sweet, in our painfully masculine surroundings.

But I had no share in her. She swept past me with all sorts of little crinkly rustlings, and promptly smiled me out of the office. For when I attempted my compliment she told me to keep it for the next dance, making me feel a little cheap. And seeing that there was purpose, a little stronger than usual, behind her smile, I took myself away quickly.

Indeed I was a little startled, but not entirely at her. For I marked the aspect, first of dismay, next of sulky doggedness, which her father assumed. I went out and closed the door softly.

My desk was not far from this door, and I worked but half-heartedly, watching for her appearance and planning to escort her to the street. Thus I came to have an idea that a certain tension existed inside. For first I saw the transom above the door closed quietly. Since this was usually open for ventilation—indeed, I never before had seen it closed—I felt with a little awe that greater matters than finance were to be discussed. And discussed they were, if discussion consists in a stiff demand and a grudging compliance. For Mr. Worthen bellowed repeatedly, at some length, and with much indignation, as was observed by Denny, who came and leaned across my desk.

“You’d think it was a bull market, from the noise the old man makes. But somehow I think the bears will win out.”

Then, when Denny had left me, I heard through the door the familiar clang of the private safe. The bellow subsided to a rumble, and the office door opened. I rose. Gertrude, in the doorway, was looking back.

“You might say good-by.”

I hastily sat down again, and waited for the leave-taking to finish. A growl came, the door shut, and Gertrude was passing my desk. “Gertrude, may I——?”

She stopped and looked at me. "The young financier leaving his work? No, Binney, stay where you are. Don't destroy the impression of industry. But I"—and she shook at me one of our long blue office envelopes—"I have been busy, too!" Smiling, she left me.

The effect of this was to make me wonder vaguely as to the relations between Gertrude and her father. Vaguely! Yes, it never had occurred to me to pry deep into motives and actions, to examine my world critically, or to face unwelcome possibilities. In the present case I pictured to myself a demand for money, an unwilling acquiescence, and a packet of crisp banknotes carried away in the long blue envelope. From this I deduced that the expense of maintaining Gertrude and her establishment was considerable. Finally I got so far as to speculate whether Gertrude were extravagant.

I could not think it. Not fundamentally extravagant. Her purposefulness, for which I had a growing respect, seemed inconsistent with any lapse in common sense. If her father expected her to maintain his house on too small an allowance, then naturally came battle. But Gertrude seemed capable of confining herself within all necessary limits. Dwelling approvingly on this thought of her, I naturally had little sympathy with the irritation which her father displayed during the remainder of the morning. Luckily, I was able to stick to my desk and my business. Denny, more fortunate still, grinned knowingly at me as, during the first

outbreak, he seized his hat and slipped out of the office. But, the rest of the clerks were very uncomfortable. I did not see how I escaped except for a feeling of conscious innocence which sustained my calm whenever Mr. Worthen turned a scowling glance in my direction. I saw no reason why he should punish me for what Gertrude might have done.

But in the end he managed to give me an unpleasant task. About to leave the office for his lunch, he paused at my desk and stood glaring at me, expressionless. I met his glance with my absurdly childlike innocence. But I knew enough to rise respectfully.

"Can I do anything for you, Mr. Worthen?"

Not a gleam of intelligence brightened his face. "You know that fellow Stidger? I want you to stay in the office until he comes, unless I come back first. Give him this message: He can't have it. That's all—he can't have it."

"Yes, sir."

He bent his glance on me at last as if I were a real person. "You don't understand, of course. That's why I ask you to give the message." And he walked away.

I was resentful. The tone of his last remarks was as contemptuous as if addressed to the office boy. He had scarcely left the room before I was arranging to leave for the rest of the day. He could snap at others, not at me. And having set my desk in order, I waited impatiently for Stidger to arrive,

The little grubby man, when at last I intercepted him on his way to Mr. Worthen's door, tried to push past me. "I've got to see your boss."

I showed him the empty office. "He's out."

He pointed to the clock. "I'm on time to the minute."

"He left a message for you," I said.

Then he fell back and glared at me. "By God, you've got ahead of me!"

"The message," I said coldly, "is simply: 'You can't have it.'"

"Of course," he sneered. "Clever, ain't you?"

I left him and went to my desk, took my hat and gloves, and prepared to go. This time it was he who stopped the way.

I can see ourselves now, in the half-empty office, with no one near. I must have loomed above him very large and very finished, while he, like an untidy little terrier, bristled before me. He had fallen into one of his instantaneous rages, but I had the curious sense that he felt baffled. It did not interest me, and I knew, of course, that it would but aggravate his mood to let him see this.

"Clever, ain't you?" he insisted. "You know you think you are."

"I've given the message, Mr. Stidger," I replied. "You will have to go to Mr. Worthen for any explanation."

"I can explain it myself," he snapped. "Oh, you self-satisfied monkey!"

"Much obliged, 'm suah," I returned, with a

touch of that English accent which we fellows often practised among ourselves, in imitation of Henry Irving, who then was at the height of his success. "Is there any message for Mr. Worthen?"

He became suddenly quiet and studied me closely, as if with a new idea. "Are you so smart after all?" he asked.

I waited patiently, rather loftily I am afraid, while the fiery little eyes searched me.

"Yes," he cried abruptly, "yes, there is a message, and get what you can out of it. Tell him I'm ready when he is."

It suited me to bow respectfully, with an irony that was to recoil upon my own head. "I will inform him."

At that he sneered. "Why, for all your fine clothes and manners, you're a farmer yet." With a contemptuous snort he went away; and I, deciding to get his message off my mind, and still determining to enjoy the afternoon, waited till Mr. Worthen returned.

He wrinkled his brow when I repeated Stidger's words, and looked at me very sharply. "He is ready when I am? What did he mean by that?"

"I haven't the least idea," I answered, and satisfied him. Perhaps the reader sees his way through all this. But I had not even asked myself why both Stidger and Mr. Worthen had defied me to find a meaning in their messages, nor had it occurred to me that the events of the morning had any connection with each other, or with me.

CHAPTER XVIII

I HAD contrived to satisfy myself that I had not seen Margery. But I had seen Gertrude, and the charm of her had had something to do with my resolve to stay no more at the office that day. So at four o'clock, properly adorned, I presented myself at her house and was admitted. While the butler went to announce me I very leisurely took off my overcoat in the hall.

I had scarcely tossed it upon the big chest when a thrill seized me before I was aware of the cause. Then I analyzed it. A rustle in the upper hall, a voice speaking, and an instant response within myself. It meant home; it meant—Margery! I started toward the stairs. And yet I went merely on instinct, for I had not heard the voice clearly. So, puzzled, I looked up.

From the two upper halls the stairs came down, right and left, to the landing above which hung Mr. Worthen's great portrait. Descending from the right, and almost upon the landing, was a girl, a woman—in the dusk of the city house I could not clearly see. But she had Margery's height, something of Margery's figure, and her mass of soft hair.

"Margery!" I cried.

If she heard me, the response was only in a quickened step. She crossed the landing and began ascending to the upper hall.

"Margery!" I cried again.

She went rapidly.

I spoke once more; then as she disappeared I started up the stairs.

How soon I should have come to my senses I can but wonder. It was Gertrude's voice that checked me when I was half-way to the landing. "Why, Binney!" She came from the right-hand hallway, descending to me directly, swiftly. And I, stopping, stood abashed at my breach of manners.

Just above me Gertrude paused, looking at me calmly. "You surely were not coming farther?"

"Upon my word, Gertrude, I thought I saw my cousin Margery crossing the landing and going up again. She would not answer when I spoke."

"Is that a reason for your being here?" She was cold as ice. Never had I been so rebuked. Nor ever before had I met the idea that Gertrude could be hostile to me. But it came now, like a blow in the face, while, haughty and aloof, she awaited my explanation.

"Gertrude," I mumbled, "I beg your pardon. I forgot myself."

She did not relax. "Your cousin Margery?" Cowed, I felt that a sneer was coming. Then she deliberately stabbed me. "I didn't know you were so devoted to her."

I felt hot with shame. "If you only knew how I reproach myself for writing home so little!" Her glance searched me for sincerity. "And yet," I added, "it hurt me to suppose she would not speak to me."

It was a relief when she coolly smiled and passed me. "Conscience, Binney," she said over her shoulder. "Perhaps you saw the seamstress." She led the way down into the parlor, then turned and faced me. "Do I need to tell you that Margery is not in the house?"

"No," I said uncomfortably. "Forget it if you can, Gertrude. I don't suppose it would have happened if I hadn't fancied myself to have seen Margery already once to-day." And I told her of the incident at the North Station. "My imagination," I concluded.

As I explained I felt, in discouragement, how the very atmosphere of a person may be chilly and repellent. Gertrude did not warm at all; even the yellow of her gown was in some way as cold as the glint of her clear eye. She listened without expression, as if deciding what to think of such a person as I.

"It's not imagination," she pronounced dryly. "I'm afraid you're dull."

I could not pluck up spirit. For ten minutes, I suppose, though they seemed an hour, I labored to re-establish good feeling. But every fibre in me was ashamed of my bad breeding, and I could not wonder that Gertrude was offended that I

had ventured to set foot upon her stairs. With great relief I heard the door-bell ring. Outside there was a carriage at the curb.

"There are callers," I said. "Gertrude, I'm going."

She, too, glanced out. When I offered her my hand her manner had changed. I had gathered up my hat and coat, and the butler was at the front door, when I began my farewell. "Gertrude, forget it if you can."

The swift cordiality of her glance surprised me. Her firm, slender fingers grasped mine as she met my eye with sudden kindness. "Why, it's all right, Binney. But you'd better go." For in my relief, such is a young man's foolishness, I offered to stay. "Come Monday, Binney." And between relief and wonderment I went to the door. There I met the visitor.

Colleston's sister! Neat, compact, and masterful, she was entering with an air of purpose. As I stood aside to let her pass she in acknowledgment smiled and bowed. It was surely she. In amusement I went out and down the steps. That was why Gertrude was cordial!

So her social success was coming. I did not measure what it might mean to me, but wished that I might witness the meeting in the parlor that I had just left. And though, of course, the draped windows would be quite blank, from the sidewalk I threw a backward glance at them.

Nothing, naturally, in the lower windows. But

a movement in a window of the second story drew my eyes upward. A figure was just vanishing.

A woman? A girl? Then Margery?

A sudden anger overwhelmed me. There was no pause for thought, just a wave of fury at the certainty that I had been deceived. I believe I took a step toward the house, but I went no farther. I struck my cane on the ground with such force that it splintered in my hand. Then I wrenched it in two and flung the pieces across the roadway into the park, and, turning my back on that place, I stamped away.

Then, so variable was I, miserable doubt came over me. Because a seamstress crossed a landing, because a servant stood in a window, was I to believe this thing? I walked softly, and wondered at my passion.

And if Margery did choose to come to town on business of her own, might she not consult whom she pleased? And if Gertrude kept Margery's secret, why should I complain?

Fool! In any case, fool! So I whispered to myself. And so whispering, hoarsely and sincerely earnest, I slunk around the first corner.

After my swelling burst of rage I was ashamed. Next, to be unable to see my way through my perplexities shamed me still more. How to decide on the facts of the case; whether to rebel or submit, and in either case how to bear myself: these were my baffling problems. In this mental confusion I knew that I was strongly suspicious and

deeply hurt, yet at the same time self-reproachful. Why hadn't I made myself more of a man, so that at need my poor cousin could come to me? My reflections made terrible inroads upon my conceit.

That day of coincidences ended by proving my suspicions. At supper-time (the country names of meals still clung in my vocabulary) I took my troubles to a restaurant, not too fashionable, where I could satisfy my new fastidiousness without the need of evening clothes. And a very good meal had just been spread before me when my spiritless eyes fell upon a quartette at their dinner, only four tables away across the narrow room. Col-lester first I saw, his sister next, then Gertrude. While I waited for an intervening waiter to move I knew who the fourth of the party must be. And she it was—Margery.

I was neither surprised nor satisfied, nor anything except quietly convinced. Yet I was convinced of a good deal which suddenly crystallized itself.

First, a family bond seemed to snap. At Petersham our two families at the Hill lived in a fellowship that was marked by the fact that we literally stood against all comers. The outside pressure, the need of keeping our boundaries inviolate, knit us together into a little clan. Since my find Cousin Lon had stood aloof; but I had felt that Margery held the more closely to the union. But now she, too, had broken the bond. From this time father, mother, and I now stood alone.

Next, I knew that the fault was my own. Margery would never be with these people, here in the city, but for some fatal weakness of mine that kept her away from me.

And, finally, I felt what it was to be cut off from this old playmate of mine. Knowing that for the first time in my life I could not take Margery for granted, I saw her through new eyes. She held her own, to begin with, with these city women. Her simple dress, which I knew she had made herself, was entirely becoming; her poise was perfect. Her head was shapely and erect, her manner naturally quiet and composed. And the calm sweetness of the profile, the sympathetic mouth, the honest, kindly eye—! That I could have neglected her! That I could have failed her!

At this I may have groaned; at any rate, I gave some sign of my emotion, for my waiter, standing near, coughed with great discretion. Then he bent over me solicitously. "Can I get you anything else, sir?"

I knew that I must get away. At any moment I might be discovered. "My bill," I demanded, and paid the man twice over. "Now my hat and coat—no, don't help me on with them; just give them to me. And now stand between me and that other table—so." And I rose and slipped away.

An impulse, as I neared the door, caused me to turn for a last look at Margery. It was fortunate that I did so, for they had discovered me; the ladies were looking at me anxiously, and Colleston

was starting in pursuit. I think he called my name. But I could not bear to stop. Margery was rising with clasped hands, when I turned away and plunged through the crowd in the lobby. Once in the street, I zigzagged rapidly where groups were thickest. I would not run; if Colleston caught me I intended simply to refuse to return. But I had given him the slip.

My one idea was to get away from further pursuit. And I saw the way. Sick with mortification, I went straight to my room, packed my bag, told my landlady not to expect me again for a couple of days, and went to the railroad-station. I would visit my clients and hunt for self-respect. As I walked through the little streets on the back of Beacon Hill, their obscurity comforted me. At the lighted station I feared that Colleston, still hunting, might find me. I bought my ticket and engaged my berth, but I was not at ease until I heard the train start and knew that there would be no stop for twenty miles.

And then I settled myself to think over the day. Though I usually regarded this as a feminine pastime, it forced itself on me now, for I could not compose myself to the reading of railroad literature. I put up the shade and, lolling in the window (for I had the section to myself), peered out at the stars through the cross-lights reflected from the lamps of the car. And studying absently the distant luminaries, I went over the scenes of the day until they began to appear with a thread of connection.

Colleston, of course by appointment, had met Margery at the station and had taken her to Gertrude's. There, in the afternoon, Mrs. Brewster called upon her. (I had one moment of amusement as I reflected that Gertrude's upward social step had come through simple Margery.) In the evening the four were probably going to the theatre, dining together beforehand, as I had seen. Stidger I supposed to be an accident of the day; but had Gertrude's rare appearance at the office anything to do with Margery's visit? How could I know unless I could guess what she obtained from her father?

One by one the berths were made up, and the lights in the car were quenched. For the third time the porter came to me. "Your berth, sah?"

The idea of bed was repugnant to me. "Porter," I decided, "I'm going to spend the night as I am. Put out all but one of the lights overhead, and forget me." So he ceased bothering, and I and the stars had the night to ourselves.

Behind the swaying curtains of the car my fellow travellers slept, I suppose, according to their natures and their consciences. But for the first time in my life I was wakeful. Not that my own conscience troubled me. It required more than my neglect of Margery to account for her avoidance of me; I felt that with her the matter turned on what I was, rather than on what I had done or left undone. But for that very reason my mortification continued to be extreme. Wherein did

I lack? How did I fail in manhood, that Colleston, a stranger, should be preferred to me?

And gradually the problem developed further. Did these events all concern me deeper than I supposed? Had Margery come on matters that affected me? Was even Stidger still busy with his schemes against me? Had his sneering words, and those of Mr. Worthen, reference to my ignorance of vital matters? If so, why was I still in the dark, and why was I hurrying away at forty miles an hour? Even though my sluggish mind refused to entertain suspicion long, a great uneasiness disturbed me.

The night slowly passed. I know I slumbered, but my sleep was fitful. Gradually the sky paled; the streaks of dawn appeared; day came. And still we sped through sleeping towns, while behind the curtains of the berths I heard the heavy breathing of the slumberers. At length the porter roused some one near me. "Twenty minutes to Littlefield, sah."

I shook myself together. Repugnance to viewing my fellow creatures in their undress combined with a sudden snatch at self-respect. Littlefield was Mr. Canby's town. It would be a relief to visit him and refresh my spirits by a glimpse of prosperity which I had helped to create.

CHAPTER XIX

THERE was sharpness in the air as I walked down Littlefield Main Street. The sun was well up, for the hour was approaching six; yet the stores, naturally, were closed, and their shades were drawn. I supposed that some one would be awake at the hotel to admit me and receive my order for breakfast. But as I reached Mr. Canby's store, to my surprise I found it open for business. The shades were up; the step had been swept. And as I peered through the window I saw Mr. Canby standing at his work. Therefore I went in.

From behind his tall desk he watched me enter, but made no move to meet me. And as I walked toward him, while he peered at me over the glasses which he used for his writing, I saw a change in him. His chubby cheeks were thinner, their rudeness had gone, and his fussily amiable glance was now expressionless. When I hailed him with a good morning the weak lips set themselves with a primness that was almost firm. And the boyish face that used to amuse me was even dignified.

"Mr. Canby," I asked in surprise, "is anything wrong?"

"Why should you come?" he demanded in return. "You can't suck a squeezed orange." And

he uttered this metaphor, so surprising from his prosaic mouth, with sour vehemence.

"On my word," I declared, seeing that something was wrong, "I don't understand."

Before deciding to answer he looked at me for a moment. He must have seen that I was honest. "You found me," he said at length. "You handed me over to your master. He squeezed me dry and threw me away. Now do you understand?"

As I looked into his pale-blue eyes, resentful and yet a little pitiful, my spirit felt the shock of discovery before my mind had grasped the situation. A misfortune—and traced to me! Then I remembered his desire to trade on margin. The market had beaten him!

"I warned you against it," I stammered, certain that I was right.

"That was a part of the game," he retorted. "One warns me, the other tempts me, and together you make me more eager. You worked together well, and you got me."

You got me! His tone, till then defiant, faded despairingly. The lips quivered. His reproach stabbed deep into my already sensitive conscience.

"I warned you," I repeated in distress. "It was no fault of mine."

On his part he could no longer maintain his repellent attitude. His grievances found voice, and his brooding took form in reproaches, again in a surprising trope.

"It's the cruelest form of hunting," he said

plaintively. "The bird or the deer is commonly killed; only a few escape and suffer. But when you get a man, like this, he's maimed for life. Hard labor for life," he went on, his mind snatching at another metaphor. "Hard labor till I die."

"Do you mean," I asked, but already sick with knowledge of his answer, "that you've lost everything?"

He looked at me almost angrily. "Don't you really know?"

"I've not heard of anything that has happened to you."

His anger faded away before my sincerity. And his plaintiveness returned. He rested his pudgy hands upon the open ledger. "I've lost more than everything," he told me. "It isn't only that the store is mortgaged, and the stock. I've given notes. I shall never get free of the debt."

As I remembered Mrs. Canby and the five little Canbys I turned almost faint. Had I done this? But no! "I warned you—I warned you!" I cried for the third time, to ease my own pain.

"You had got me going," he replied. "It was too late to stop. Besides, he was tolling me on." And seeing that I did not understand, he added, "Mr. Worthen."

"Mr. Worthen?" I cried. "He had nothing to do with you until you began to trade on margin. He left you entirely to me."

"Did he?" A touch of Mr. Canby's grimness returned, but only for a moment. It merged into

sad narration. "He dropped in one afternoon and spent the whole evening."

"And why didn't I hear of it?" I asked, surprised.

"He said you were so proud of having discovered me that he didn't want you to suppose he had any doubt of your judgment. But, finding himself going through Littlefield, he dropped over a couple of trains and looked me up."

Again a shock of anticipation chilled me. "And what did he do?"

"He excited me," admitted Canby very frankly. His watery eyes appealed for my sympathy. "He talked profits and turns of the market. And he told of the big gains in marginal buying."

"Did he ask you to try it?" I asked.

"He didn't need." And poor Canby, his confession finished, sighed and watched me sadly.

I stood bewildered. Had this thing happened? Alas, it had! A few more questions and answers, and I could not doubt.

Across that desk we stared at one another. Canby was benumbed by the weight of his burden; even his piteousness had at last descended to a dull passivity. But the chill which had quivered to my very finger-tips was giving place to a burning heat. Not Canby only had been betrayed, but I myself!

I am glad to remember that I had a few moments of thought for him. I looked at his lustreless eyes, his bowed shoulders. At the age of fifty, starting life under a load of debt! I looked about

me at the cans of paint, the bundled garden-tools, the dusty enamelled ware. This place, little Canby's little silver mine, was to be his treadmill now; what he earned from it was to go to a master.

A master! And he had called Mr. Worthen my master! Mine!

I heard the poor fellow struggling with his excuse. "I understand it's the common method with these swindlers."

So I was a swindler—or the servant of a swindler!

"If they find a chap that has a little money, they won't rest till they get their hands on it."

The truth shot home to me like an arrow into flesh. My father had a little money, and Mr. Worthen had his hands on it!

I don't remember that I said good-by to Mr. Canby. Probably he stared at me as I went unsteadily down the street. For I know that I had very little idea of where I was going, so bewildered was I with the suspicions—no, the certainties—that crowded on me. Instinct seemed to bring me to the station, and when presently a Boston train appeared, I boarded it.

On that interminable journey I followed repeatedly the wearisome circuit of my thoughts. After a couple of rounds there seemed little to add. That the admired Worthen was a swindler, that our elegant office was a bucket-shop—legitimate, of course, for the law is easy—I was forced to concede. But the concession meant a loss of self-respect. For what had been my position all

this while? That my innocent enthusiasm for Mr. Worthen and his mission, my firm belief in the wares which I ignorantly sold, made me a most efficient salesman, was plain enough. In the office I must have been regarded as grown-ups regard a child that believes in Santa Claus, and with equal care not to spoil the illusion. In business, as in society, I must have appeared as amusingly raw. And all the time I was hoodwinking clients whose inexperience was scarcely greater than my own.

Collester must have known this, hence his decent invitations to join him. Joe must have learned it, which made him labor earnestly for my redemption. Gertrude may have had a glimmer of the truth, as proved by her attempts to keep me from her father's employment—though why if she knew she did no more, I could not say. Even Margery doubtless saw the situation, though at her distance.

But—and one thing that had puzzled me in Margery's visit now was as clear as day—my immense self-satisfaction stood in the way of all their endeavors. Collester and Joe and Gertrude, all had failed; and how was Margery to make any impression on me? Perhaps their dinner, there in the restaurant, was to give a chance to consult as to some means of stirring me.

Meanwhile, what black treachery in Mr. Worthen to steal poor Canby out of my guardianship, where his ruin was not swift enough! The stock which Canby bought was slow in going bad; per-

haps it might even, in the course of years, succeed: therefore quicker methods must be used. The poor devil was knifed while I was holding him in play, as unlucky Valentine was thrust through by Mephistopheles while engaged with Faust. And I was a Faust, a stalking-horse, a stool-pigeon!

Anger burned me, and helplessness tortured me. I gnawed my fingers to prevent myself from crying aloud, now with fury, and again with fear.

For what last pressure of anxiety had brought Margery down to the city? What schemes did she suspect Mr. Worthen to be maturing? Those big, those impossibly big dividends which he had sent to father, out of which I had so joyously accepted a share! No one but Mr. Worthen knew how the little account stood, and he had absolute control over it.

At this point came in the thought: would he deal unfairly by me, at times almost an inmate of his house? Would Gertrude, supposing her to understand, permit it?

Then followed shame, that in my weakness I looked for a girl's help.

And yet I wondered if anything but Gertrude had so far stood between me and ruin. Had he wished to rob us by the crude scheme of lying about the value of the jewels, her knowledge of stones would have stood in the way. For the rest, her friendship to me was a danger, not a protection. Of course, I was some value to him as a decoy, but on the other hand I was in the way (I knew it) of

Colleston's success with Gertrude. Between us Mr. Worthen would not hesitate a moment. Socially impossible, I would soon (as soon as he saw in Gertrude a sign of tiring of me) be stripped not merely of our little fortune, but of the farm as well.

I now know what I should have done. To send for my father, bring him to the office, and demand an immediate accounting and refunding, was the only way of salvation. But I blundered. Few boys have decision of character, and I was but a boy. And now, when I was running like a hound on an open trail, I turned aside, betrayed by my own decency. For it came over me that perhaps I was prejudging the case, that there was another side of it, and that it was fair to state my suspicions and ask for an explanation.

As if one could be fair to a wolf, or get an explanation from a jackal! But such is the innocence of one brought up in honesty, that he does not suspect the depth of another's meanness. Certainly I wavered, and thought to be square. And from the moment when I concluded to let Mr. Worthen explain himself if he could, the money, yes, and far more than the money or the farm, was lost.

The train reached Boston at four, but I hurried to the office on the chance that Mr. Worthen was still there. He was, though all else but old Laycock had left the place. And Mr. Worthen received me in his office with a kindness that almost disarmed me.

"Why, Binney," he said, "you look pale. Off your feed? Haven't been neglecting your meals, my boy?"

It was a natural question on his part, whose punctuality at the table was a failing. I remembered, to my surprise, that I had not eaten for more than twenty-four hours. But that did not interest me.

"I've just discovered," I answered, "that Mr. Canby has come to grief."

My employer shot me a keen glance. "Yes," he said frankly. "An awful tumble. He's done for."

"But, Mr. Worthen," I burst out, quite as much in grief as in resentment, "he says you put into his head the idea of playing the market."

"He does?" asked Mr. Worthen coolly. "They do say that, Binney, rather than blame themselves. But all I did was to talk with him on the subjects he asked about. And it was he who insisted on venturing, as you know yourself."

It was true. Mr. Worthen's defense was good. Even if he had led human nature to betray itself, knowing the sure catastrophe, he had committed no breach. And I saw how strong was his position.

"But," I stammered, "you went to see him."

"Of course," he answered, unmoved. "I had to, Binney. You see, we were at times giving him some pretty big credits. I had to check up your opinion of him. But I didn't want to hurt your feelings by letting you know."

Impregnable again. I was stopped short. He went on, now very gravely. "These things are the sad part of business. You can't save a man from his own foolishness." And sitting with his hands folded on his desk, a picture of uprightness, he looked at me with sober regret that such things must be.

I, who had thus abruptly been disarmed, and so came without weapons to my real attack, stood perfectly blank. It was with the greatest awkwardness that I opened the subject which I knew must be discussed, if ever I was to breathe freely again.

"Mr. Worthen," I blurted, "how does my father's account stand with you?"

He looked at me with a keen flash from his little eyes. A redness crept into his forehead. But he did not stir. "Binney," he asked, "what am I to understand by such a question?"

"Why, don't you see, sir?" I cried, "if such things happen, I'm worried as to where we stand. I want to be sure that the money's all there. You don't hold anything on margin for father?"

His reply came deliberately. "I could answer you easily enough. I was looking over the account to-day. But let me ask you first: what right have you to put such a question?"

I knew at once that I had no right. Doubtless I gaped at him. He pursued his advantage.

"Do you consider the money yours?" he asked. "Of course, you found the stones."

"Why, no," I answered. "Naturally the money's father's."

"At any rate," he went on, "the account stands in his name. Unless you come with some authority from him, I have no right to show you anything about it. He would have every cause to blame me severely."

It was perfectly plain, and I mumbled my understanding. Then he rose and came to me. "But you needn't worry, Binney," he said, putting his hand upon my shoulder. His face was very kind. "It will do, won't it, if I assure you that everything is perfectly safe?"

My ideas were whirling. He was so hearty and so open and so confident, also so patient with me, that I had already lost most of the energy with which I came to the conference. I looked him in the eye, and it never wavered. He was too puffy and too wrinkled for perfect wholesomeness; his skin was very red, and the network of tiny veins on his cheek was purple. But what had that to do with the soul? He stood up to me like a man.

Yet a kind of doggedness, the failing momentum of my original intention, kept me to my purpose. My innocence made me acknowledge it. I had never learned to lie, nor did I recognize the pressing need of lying.

"I—I know you'll excuse me, sir, but I've got to talk this over with my father."

He patted me. "Quite needless, Binney."

"I can't help it, Mr. Worthen." And being

ashamed to meet his honest eye, I myself looked down.

"Why," he said as he turned away, "do what you think you must. Of course I understand. What train shall you take?"

"If I start now," I said, "I'll only get home in time to wake them out of sleep. I suppose I'll take the first train in the morning."

"Remember me to your father and mother," he said. And knowing exactly what he needed, he smiled me out of the room. I, never realizing that I had given him clear warning and plenty of time, and comforted by his assurances, breathed freely and went away.

CHAPTER XX

At the entrance of our road I dismissed the lad who had driven me over from Athol. He was disappointed; perhaps he expected to find a leaden box washed out from a rut in the road, or hanging from a bough in the orchard. But not wishing any one to be a spectator of my reception, I turned him back and, carrying my own light baggage, walked to the house.

I did not know whether I should be welcomed or reproached. So far had I fallen from my own ideal of duty that I was ashamed of myself; and most especially was I ashamed of never having returned for a visit. So now, as I climbed the bare and winter-harried slopes, from which all color seemed bleached, I reproached myself for leaving my parents so long in this solitude, while I had been enjoying myself in the city.

It was early April, and the coarse snow still showed in shady hollows and under pines. It had lain, so my letters told me, three feet deep since December; its disappearance left the grass by the wayside flattened and brown. The fields and woods looked exhausted by the strain of resistance; one would have said that no life was left in them. Not a bud had swollen. Even the ploughed land, surface-dried by the searching west wind, showed

dark only in the frost-cracks, coarse tracery running systemless. It was not until I lifted my eyes to look up the valley, and saw the tree tops of the farther ridge making a violet blur against the hazy distance, that I found beauty anywhere.

As I neared the top of the ascent my eye was drawn to the aspects of the place. The winter washing of the road was here repaired by loads of gravel, roughly graded. My eye told me from which of our two pits the gravel had been taken. Father had been bushing out along the roadside, where the vacant spaces were conspicuous, and where the brush still lay heaped. But most noticeable to me were the limbs which strewed the ground in the orchard. Father and I were always at variance in the matter of pruning, where, curiously, he was the radical and I the conservative in the trimming of old trees. The yellow scars of his saw were visible everywhere, and I saw that he had taken advantage of my absence to slash heavily among the veterans.

But father was always lovable in whatever he did. This very extravagance came from his enthusiastic belief in the fertility of the farm. And as he carefully made each wound, trimming the stubs flush with the trunk, he promised himself that the yield of the tree would be increased by diminishing its wood. I could imagine the smile with which he contemplated each day's destruction, and his guilty satisfaction that his son was not there to check him.

The house came in sight. I had mounted the rise that took me above it, and that shut it out from the view of the highroad. Now I saw its ridge-pole, its roof, and then the whole of its red frontage. It looked toward me with the welcoming warmth which always seemed to characterize its hospitable proportions. Except for Joe's visit, the house had never sheltered any one but ourselves; yet its greeting always seemed to me very inclusive. Beyond it clustered the barn and sheds, while, behind all, the valley opened toward the west. The double pine towered above the nearer woods; the farther tree tops were purple, and the distance a blue gray.

The farmyard was empty, save for a motionless form that sat upon its haunches and blinked at nothing. Breakfast must have been good; Jones, well satisfied with his lining, was ruminating like a cow. But the sound of my step caught his ear from a distance, and he looked toward me with immediate resentment. To Jones all intruders were of low and vile parentage, not to be tolerated in respectable society. He growled at me notably. "Now," thought I, "I'll fool him."

But Jones was a long-sighted beast. When once he focussed on me, something checked his growl. His trot toward me was not threatening, but inquiring and hopeful. He paused, gazed, came on again, paused again. At last, while still his tail was waving doubtfully, he evidently said within himself: "'Tis he!" Sure at last, he capered toward

me with his spine curved now right, now left, wagging, as it were, his whole body from his shoulders backward. The action expressed subservience in a manner quite shocking in so doughty a warrior. But the compliment was all the greater. When his whine of delight was audible as he approached, and when finally he was bouncing around me, hopping as high as my breast and yapping in excitement, but in deep respect never touching me, then the welcome was complete. No man could resist such homage. I dropped my bag, caught him to me, and hugged him like a child.

The caress upset him completely. When I released him (which I did promptly, else he had licked my face off) he started for the house, yelling at the top of his lungs. Turning in a wide sweep, he came back, circled me, belly to the ground, rushed again to the house, and again returned. In this way he announced that his lord and master had come back and was gracious unto him.

The secret was out. Mother was immediately in the yard; father came hurrying from the barn. Each knew what had happened. Standing together, hand in hand, they waited our approach. Their eyes were wet, their voices trembling when they spoke. And they welcomed me as if no son could have been more dutiful.

So relieved was I, so pleasant was it to be made much of, so easy to put off confession, that I delayed speaking of my errand. Whether the outcome would have been different I still wonder.

The doctor tells me that I have no cause to reproach myself; and yet—! Well, it was a pleasant forenoon. Mother showed me the changes in the house: she had moved the sofa, shifted some pictures, covered a chair. Then father took me into the yard to point out this and that. And whenever the talk came too close to my own doings I asked a question that set me free again.

After a while father was doing all the talking. Mother was watching me. She had made out that I had something on my mind, but she was biding her time. Father, innocent that my coming had any purpose, was garrulous. He expressed his pride in my appearance and manners. My very way of speaking, he said, was changed. In a single winter I had become a gentleman. Such praise was painful, and I changed the subject. And as father was always capable of sustained talk on the farm, to that subject we turned. When he began to lead us about from place to place, I knew that I was safe as long as I chose to be. While mother followed, occasionally turning her bright, inquiring glance on me, father, his arm in mine or his hand upon my shoulder, led me from barn to shed, from shed to field, pointing, explaining, planning.

Father loved the farm. The good farmer's love for his land is like a father's thought of his child. According to the help that he has given he can take pride in the development. My father schemed for the farm as he had schemed for me. He had made his occasional mistakes, as farmers and fathers

do; but (at least according to his calculation) both land and son improved under his hand. He judged them, too, not for defects but for advantages. Thus if, as is everywhere true among our hills, the fields were still rocky, their improvement could be measured by their stone heaps and their walls, and by the crop record contained in father's painstaking accounts. Of the son he had to judge by the outside; but if, as God knows is true, my faults were many, my father's kindly eye was satisfied as he dwelt on what he considered to be virtues.

Ah, well! It was a happy time, and father's talk flowed freely, as his joy in my return bubbled over. And while I too enjoyed the home-coming, I felt shame that I had not enjoyed it oftener. Why had I not frequently returned, to give this simple pleasure, and to bask in the warmth of this appreciation?

One small temptation I yielded to. In our tour father avoided the orchard, but when we came back to the yard we were in sight of it. I led him to the wall; I pointed to the fallen limbs that had not yet been carted away; and then silently I looked at him.

Guilt flushed his forehead. For a moment, as his embarrassed eye roved wildly, it seemed as if he were the son and I the father. When our eyes met again he laughed, first awkwardly, but then, as he saw that I did not care, in relief.

"Honestly, Binney boy," he said, "I couldn't help it."

Very pleasant it was, and very good to remember. If the impending calamity could not be avoided, I am glad that I kept my story to myself, and enjoyed those two hours with my father.

Mother first saw the approach of Margery, and cried out her name. My cousin came driving into the yard, in the old rig that was so shabby, behind the old driving-horse that was so sleek—for while Cousin Lon had charge of the wagons and the work-horses, it was Margery that fed and groomed this ancient beast. She sat with her familiar poise, upright but not stiff; her eyes searched us anxiously to see what news I had brought; she tried to smile easily, but she failed, for all the time she was striving to explain the occasion to herself, fearing to guess what announcement she was bringing.

She had found a letter at the post-office, she explained, as she handed it to father over the wheel. She thought he would like to have it at once, so she had come to us before going home.

I, foolish, forgetting how much she must know, and how much more she must dread, was piqued that she did not welcome me with my parents' warmth. "Margery," I asked, "aren't you glad to see me?"

She tried to be cordial, but it was an afterthought and a failure, especially since persistently her eye wandered to father. This rather hurt.

"Surely," I said, "you didn't expect to see me here."

"Why, no," she answered. "I thought the

letter might contain news of you, since it was from your office, and in Mr. Worthen's hand. Now that you're here——"

From the office! Posted last night, then, for I knew the mails. Addressed by Mr. Worthen before he left the office, for there were no stenographers there so late. And I forgot Margery, and she forgot me, for we both were frightened. Mother forgot neither of us, but studied us closely as we watched father preparing to open the envelope. I have talked it all over with them since.

"From Mr. Worthen," said father, smiling. "Another dividend, I suppose. They're thick as spatter."

Then mother, too, caught the name and the fear, and turned to him quickly. We three waited, silent, till that which was to come should come, whatever it might be.

Father was thinking of prosperity as he opened the letter. There are few subjects pleasanter to contemplate. The blow came then the harder. I saw first his smile fade, then his cheek pale, then his wide eye turn anxiously to mine.

"Binney," he gasped, "what is this?"

He held out the letter, and I took it. "Read it aloud," directed mother. And I read:

Sudden changes in the market require an immediate advance of \$6,127.30 to meet the fall in prices of Copper Union, Top-Notcher, and North Creek Gold. There is no money of yours on hand for this purpose. I sincerely regret this misfortune, which the enclosed schedule will explain.

As the market is still falling, following my discretion I have released the stock to save you further loss. If you are unable to meet this demand I must ask you to come to Boston to arrange loans. A mortgage on your farm and buildings will be acceptable. Again regretting, I am,

Yours faithfully,

W. W. WORTHEN.

An enclosed list purported to show how father's money had been lost. I did not read it. More gambling again! How cold I was! How clean Mr. Worthen tried to sweep! Oh, that devil!

I felt my father's clutch upon my arm. "Binney—Binney——?"

How could I meet his eye? But as I looked down, stammering, he learned the truth.

Then my mother cried aloud. And Margery, behind me in the carriage, screamed.

They had seen the change come over him. I, looking up, saw his leaden face. His eyes had turned upward; his jaw was falling. I caught him as he toppled, hurried him into the house, and laid him on the couch. There was but a gasp or two, and he was gone. Neither mother nor Margery nor the doctor could recall him.

Oh, that long, dreadful day, that sleepless night, through which I wrestled with the thought that I was my father's slayer! Mother absolved me; the doctor assured me that I could not have so softened this shock that it would not have ruptured the weak heart. But there should have been no shock at all! Months before, I should have fore-

stalled the disaster. To this there could be no answer.

Margery strove to comfort me. "Nothing that you could have done, Binney, would have saved him. Had you broken the news yourself, it would have been too much for him. At any minute, it seems, he was likely to go."

"But for me," I answered, "he might have died happily, not with this frightful sense of betrayal. Why did you go down to Boston?" She hesitated to answer. "Why did you consult Mr. Collester? Wasn't it because you expected this knavery?"

"Partly," she admitted. "The dividends were too great. It all seemed like hocus-pocus. And you and your father were so confident!"

"I was innocent till yesterday," I said. "I believed in that swindler till accident opened my eyes. And when my stupidity led us to this end, how can I do anything but blame myself?"

She could not answer.

A man's dull senses let him live through these crises, though it seemed as if I must burn inwardly till nothing was left of me. In two days father was laid in the little cemetery that lies between the farms, where none but Hartwells lie, in graves that none but Hartwells dig. It was Cousin Lon who performed this last service, and who laid the sod again over my father.

Then on my return home—though never to this day have I ceased to reproach myself—my brood-

ing left me. It was time for action. I spent an hour in study, then decided what to do.

"Mother," I said, "to-morrow I shall go to Boston on the early train."

She had been observing me, and was prepared. She came and stood in front of me, her face solemn with grief and warning.

"Binney," she said, "I want no blood-money. Neither should you. And remember it was the Lord who said: 'Vengeance is mine.'" Thus she strove to turn me from the misery of the law and the wickedness of violence.

"I know it," I answered. "And I suppose it was some old heathen who said: 'Heaven helps those who help themselves.' Mother, I will remember your text. Do you remember my proverb."

We spoke no more about it. She acknowledged my right to follow my judgment, and helped me to prepare for the journey.

CHAPTER XXI

I HAD made my plans for securing a talk with Mr. Worthen. Doubtless he had given orders to keep me from his private office—but I knew the place. He often used a private door; and it was through this, walking boldly, that I not only reached his office, but reached it unobserved. My satisfaction was heightened by finding that he was working, not at his desk, but at his table. I shut the door behind me.

He turned, somewhat resentfully, to see who had intruded. Surprise kept him quiet till I had drawn near him. Then nimbly he started up and reached for the push-button on his desk.

I struck him with the back of my hand on his chest, and slammed him into his chair.

There he sat, gasping. The color left all of his face except that purple nose of his, his mouth was wide open, and for a single moment his eyes flickered shut. Though I saw he was near to fainting, I sat on the corner of his table and waited, quite without regret. Of course he was too soft to strike like that, but I did not care. Gradually he recovered and looked at me again. He moistened his lips and spoke in a panting little voice, such as I had never heard from him.

“Binney, you—you might have—killed me.”

"And perfectly willing," I answered. "You have killed my father."

The color all came back to his face. "Killed him?" he cried.

"Quietly!" I warned. "Yes. To find you a thief was too much for him."

He raised both hands to heaven. "I declare to God—!" he was beginning solemnly.

Exasperated, I seized his wrists. Instantly he was silent, giving himself to me passively. And as I held those pudgy wrists of his and looked down into his face I saw a new side of him.

He was not afraid. His non-resistance was suppleness, for he knew he could not contend with me. But his mind was active: he was thinking how to get the best of me. Of his own crime he did not think at all.

"No remorse," I said. "Not even the shadow of regret." I threw his hands down into his lap, where they lay as if detached from him. "How well you must be used to the reproaches of the sheep you have flayed."

"Binney," he said gently, "you're unfair."

To be soothed! Had I the aspect of a dangerous madman that he should sit so, and try to quiet me, and listen for a hand at the door-knob? I saw that any accident might interrupt us, and so went at my task.

"Get me," I directed, "the papers that cover my father's affairs, the accounts and the correspondence."

He started to rise. "They are in the outer office."

But I thrust him back. "You are to stay here."

"Then I must call in Miss Smith." He made a movement toward the bell.

"Don't you suppose," I replied, "that I know where you keep the papers of your personal clients? They are here in the safe. Go and get my father's!" I let him rise.

He went slowly toward the safe. "Perhaps they're here," he said doubtfully. "I'll look, to satisfy you." He was reaching out for the knob when I saw the chance that I was giving him. Thrusting ahead of him, I swung the door open.

"Don't try to shut and lock it," I warned. "And keep away from the bell. Now rummage."

He made a feint at searching, but all the time, while his soft hands pattered at the files, I knew that he was listening for release. He angered me.

"Get it quick," I said with my hand on his collar, "or I'll make you dig it out with your teeth."

He sighed, and drew out the file. I told him to sit down.

The file seemed to be complete. Mr. Worthen was quite in advance of his time in his careful filing and individual-account sheets. His system allowed him to keep the accounts of all his clients separately; his general accounts were on loose sheets, very convenient for substitution or falsification. What I had feared was that my father's letters might already have been destroyed. But Mr. Worthen had evidently not expected me to

use force with him; most of his clients, I imagine, were lambs in more senses than one. The letters and the account sheets, a thin enough file, appeared all to be there. When I had folded all the papers they took up very little room in my pocket.

He still looked at me steadily and without worry.

"I suppose," I said, "that the moment I left you the other day, you and old Laycock fell to work, studied up figures, made a few new account sheets, and ruined my father—on paper. That is how you could write, the very day when you had assured me that everything was right, that the money was all gone. And I suppose, too, that I never could prove it on you two old dog-foxes."

"Really," he agreed, with mild candor, "I don't see what good the accounts will do you. Any lawyer will tell you they're useless to you."

"You fool," I said, "I wanted the letters. Father never kept any copies. The letters will show that you had my father's money in trust. Oh, I know there was no deed, and probably the law can't take hold of you."

"Any lawyer will tell you that," he said placidly.

"But suppose I don't want my money back," I retorted. "Suppose all I want is the revenge of exposing you—by a lawsuit that I'm willing to lose, say, or perhaps by travelling a little among my old clients, and showing them this bunch of letters. What becomes of this large and profitable branch of the business?"

I had found the way to bring the sweat to his

forehead. All his calm was gone. "Binney," he urged eagerly, "I have been a good friend of yours."

"And stabbed me in the back!" I said.

He looked away; he looked down. And I saw hot shame flush his forehead.

"Get me now," I directed, "Mr. Canby's papers. Everything, including his mortgage deeds and his notes."

He produced them; it was a chance, I suppose, that the valuables were not at the deposit vault. I made him burn in the fireplace the orders and accounts and cancel the deeds and notes. "Just to make sure," I ordered next, "write him a receipt in full for everything. Haven't you got enough from him?" I demanded savagely, when he would have protested. And he wrote the receipt.

"And now," I said, "give me the copy of the old pirate's will."

He edged forward in his chair, explaining confidentially. "Gertrude's got it."

"Gertrude?" I cried, dismayed. "Have you dragged her into this dirty business?"

"She came and made me give it to her," he explained. "Your cousin told her that Stidger wanted it."

"And so," I rejoined angrily, "she knew you capable of selling it to him, if he were able to pay so much as a dollar for it. Well, then, get it for me!"

He was alarmed, and drew back. "She said

she would give it to you or your father, and nobody else."

My dismay was quite equalled by my surprise. "You really mean you cannot get it?"

Embarrassed, he tried to explain. "You know, Binney, that Gertrude's the sort of girl that—well, you know Gertrude."

I knew her, I reflected, all the more clearly for this view of her father, unable to make her act against her will.

"Of course," he added, trying to be at ease, "I can try, if you wish." And he essayed an independent air.

"I will manage it myself," I decided. "I suppose she's right: you aren't to be trusted with it for a minute." And I rose to leave him.

More nimbly than he had started for the bell, he leaped before me as I turned to the door. Misunderstanding, I raised my hand to seize him; but instead, he clutched at me. And now, with a rush of words, he was pleading with me.

"Binney, you mustn't tell her! You won't, will you? She—she doesn't understand about business. Can't you just write her, asking for the will? Or if you see her, just say—just say anything, if you leave alone this matter of—of—" And unable to soften his deeds into pleasant phrases, he merely gasped at me, baffled by the situation.

I thrust away the hands that were clawing at my sleeve. "Then go yourself."

He gazed at me forlornly. "She would have the truth out of me."

"All this," I said, "at the fear of Gertrude's learning facts which you acknowledge here in talk with me, though you'd perjure yourself to deny them in a court of law. Let me ask: while you were planning this trick on me, did you ever think how you were to keep it from Gertrude?"

He must have counted on appealing to me to spare Gertrude, as he was doing now. For without answering me he urged: "Gertrude's been very kind to you."

"She would have been kinder to let me alone," I said. "Well, I will go to her, and get the will, and lie to her about the facts, if I can. But you—" I took him by the chin, and turned his face up to mine, while he stood as docile as a child. "Pray, damn you, to escape from both Gertrude and me!"

I left him blinking in the middle of the office, his pride roughly jolted, yet with his tricky mind ready, I knew, to begin against me if only he saw a way. Hence my reminder that I could damage him. As for myself, first I sent, by express, Mr. Canby's documents to him. Next I hired a safe-deposit box for my father's papers. And finally I went to my interview with Gertrude, not at all relishing the prospect.

CHAPTER XXII

GERTRUDE spoke down to me over the banisters: "Why, Binney, calling in the morning!"

"Yes," I answered. "But it's mostly business."

"Then come up-stairs to my workroom," she replied.

So I went up those stairs which she had so recently forbidden me, and found her waiting at the top. The workroom to which she led me proved to be a charming little library, where apparently she had been writing at a desk. Not entirely orderly, the little room, but then, I should not have expected that of Gertrude. There was a fire burning in the grate, and scattered on the hearth before it were odds and ends of torn letters, engraved invitations, and the like. But Gertrude herself was as neat as a new pin, becomingly dressed, though the fashion of her garments I cannot describe, nor her ornaments. I know only that the total effect was good.

Gertrude was gracious, but inquisitive. "Where did you flee the other night? Margery was heart-broken."

"Was Margery in town?" I asked, a little roughly. "I should like to be sure of it before I admit having seen her."

"Now you're cross," she said. "But I had to tell that naughty story to you. She didn't want you to know she was here."

"You told me no story," I returned. "You merely led me to change my belief, and all without exactly denying it. It was very clever. But, Gertrude, next time I'll take your oath."

Again I was too rough, and I regretted it when I saw her flush. I made up my mind to be more gentle.

"You men teach us to deceive," Gertrude cried.

"Doubtless we do," I agreed. And as I found neither lightness nor jollity at command, I went at my point. "But, Gertrude, I had forgotten all about that. I came for something that you have of mine."

We had been standing, but now she sat down at her desk, with a manner that indicated that the interview was to last as long as she pleased. "Sit down, Binney," she invited. "You mean the curious old will?"

"Yes," I answered, still standing. "It is very good of you to have kept it for me."

She made me sit—yes, made me. Men always did what she wanted. "I have had it for only a few days," she said. "Margery was so anxious about it, that I—and why should you want it now?"

"Merely to get it back again," I said.

"How did you know I had it?"

"Your father told me."

"You asked it of him?"

"Yes."

"What do you want it for?"

The same question, and I gave the same reply:

"Merely to get it back again."

She sat and puzzled at me. "Why," she asked, but speaking softly, scarcely to me, "why shouldn't it be left with father?—Binney," she said abruptly, "you called it yours. But it isn't."

"It's near enough to mine," I answered.

"It's your father's."

"Call it my father's, if only you give it to me."

"He should write me for it."

If father only could write again! But I controlled the throb. "Surely I may come for it."

She shook her head. Charming! she did it. Ah, Gertrude, with her keen, bright, enticing features, indescribably alert, pert, provoking, half childish, half too wise! She was, I began to see, trying to overcome my defenses by this spiral approach, confusing both by her indirectness and by her charm. And now she continued her circuit.

"Why does that man Stidger want it?"

"I don't know."

"It's only a copy?"

"Yes."

"And why isn't it safe with me?"

I answered: "Because some time when I want it you may not be at hand."

"I'll give it up at any time," she answered.

"Then why not now?" I retorted.

"But why now?" demanded she. And still without the slightest intention of yielding, she cocked her head on one side, as if she had finished me.

But I had made up my mind to have the will. Therefore I made an admission, the consequences of which I did not foresee. Nor do I now consider them logical. "This house isn't fire-proof," I argued. "And you go away in summer. You oughtn't to travel with the thing. Therefore I have hired a safe-deposit box to put it in."

"Oho," said Gertrude. Shaking herself, she sat upright. All her light manner vanished as, having learned what she needed, she leaped at her conclusions. "Margery wouldn't trust father. And you won't trust me."

I was beginning to protest. But with sparkling eyes, as she thrust her pretty head nearer to me, she concluded her hop, step, and jump.

"And you have quarrelled with father!"

I sat dumb, looking on her with astonishment. Rapidly she spoke. "I knew that something was wrong when I saw you coming. For I saw you from the window. You were walking fast, you seemed to be talking to yourself, and something had provoked you."

She was right. I had been thinking over my interview with her father.

"Of course," she finished, "I had to know what was wrong. What did you quarrel with father about?"

"It's just personal," I evaded.

Gertrude's smooth forehead wrinkled. "Binney, you forgot your promise."

"What promise?" I demanded.

"That if ever you got into difficulties with father, you would come to me before breaking with him. And now you have broken with him!"

She was growing excited. And how should she know this?

"I know," she cried, anticipating my question and tapping with her little foot, "because otherwise you would never have asked father for the will. Why have you quarrelled with him?" She was peremptory. All her good humor and her pretty teasing ways were gone. This was the imperious Gertrude before whom her own father trembled.

"Because—" I stopped. How could I explain? But she pressed me, demanding an answer. And I stammered clumsily: "Because we differed."

"Go on!" she directed.

"As to his treatment of—of a friend of mine."

I said no more, fearing that another word would be too much. But I had overstepped already. Gertrude drew back in her chair, and her cold eye glittered at me.

"And you tell me that!" she said between her little teeth. So she sat and looked at me.

I bore her glance most miserably for a moment, then dropped my eye to the floor. Gertrude's anger was a new thing. Little indifferences, even little displeasures, I knew well enough in her; they

were but surface ruffings and quickly smoothed. Even her recent cold rebuke was not like this. For now I had stirred her to her depths. When she spoke, her voice trembled.

"I warned you in Petersham. I warned you here. Twice I asked you not to work with father. Plainer language I could not give, for very shame. But, Binney, you are one of those who do not understand."

It was quite true. My perceptions are of the surface. In things both little and big, too often I miss the meaning.

"And now," she said, her voice still quivering, strongly resentful, "you come and throw this in my face!"

Unfair. It was she who had forced an acknowledgment which I was too honest or too dull to avoid. I was looking up, in protest, when she suddenly turned to her desk.

"Oh," she cried vehemently, "you shall have your paper!"

Pulling out a drawer, she emptied it on her desk, on the mass of papers already there. Her rapid fingers searched, hesitated, then gathered up several envelopes together. "Here," she said, handing them to me without turning, "let me at least get rid of these. Burn them for me."

I tossed them in the fire.

For a few moments longer Gertrude stirred the papers on her desk, as if expecting the one she sought to come uppermost. In the fireplace the

papers burst into a flame that blustered up the chimney. Gertrude seemed to stop and listen. Finally she turned and looked at me.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well?" I echoed, perplexed.

Her eyes were very scornful as she pointed to the fire.

Yes, I never understand until too late. But it was without surprise that knowledge now came to me. In the grate the papers had burned to ashes; the parchment, blackened and illegible, was still slowly twisting on itself in the heart of the fire. Without surprise, and indeed without resentment, I recall that I slowly smiled as I turned again to Gertrude.

She was rising. "Now!" she said defiantly. Yet there came a little catch in her breath as our eyes met, and she looked at me as if wondering how a man could smile at such a time. When I asked her to sit she took her chair again, but nervously, as wondering what I would do.

"You can do what you please," I said, "with anything of mine. And now that thing can make no more trouble."

"And you aren't angry?" she asked.

"I am sorry that I provoked you to it," I replied. Indeed, I have never been angry with her for it, either then or since.

She struggled with perplexity. "But, Binney!" she cried, half piteously, beginning to feel regret.

"But, Gertrude!" I imitated, not unkindly.

"Do you suppose I will let such a little thing come between you and me?" She was beginning to look grateful, when I added: "We'll forget it. It's of no consequence, anyway. I was just getting my things together, before going away."

"Oh," said Gertrude.

Just a dry little word, dryly uttered. She looked at me very strangely, then became entirely composed and formal. She settled herself again in her chair as if she were leading in the ritual of an afternoon tea. "You have found new employment?" She might have asked me: "Cream or lemon?"

"Only the old one," I answered. "Farming."

"Ah?" she inquired. "Indeed?" The next question should have been: "Sugar?" But she said: "You are tired of the city?" Quite conventional.

I found myself growing indignant. "Very," I replied, and equally formal. "And you see it's spring and time to plough."

"To plough," mused Gertrude daintily. "Strange!" And then she asked me with a little lifting of the eyebrows: "You like it?"

"Very much," I answered doggedly and rose. "Well, good-afternoon." And I added, in her own vein: "So good of you to have seen me."

"So good of you to have come," she responded, quite according to the book. She offered me her fingers, and I touched them listlessly. Then I was out of the room and down on the landing, and finally on the straight flight leading down. If my

head was as high as the indignation of my spirit, I must have looked very haughty indeed.

"Binney," said Gertrude softly, above me.

Her tone would have wheedled the edge off a chisel. I stopped and looked up. She was leaning over the railing and looking sweetly down. "You have not told me," she said softly, "why your necktie is black."

So sudden were the turns of her mind that I never could follow her gracefully. Bluntly I answered: "My father is dead."

If she was surprised, she did not show it. She seemed intent on her next question. "And why did you not tell me?"

Startled, I knew that I must not betray myself by hesitation. I answered promptly: "I did not wish to distress you."

As she studied me searchingly I realized that there might be two interpretations of the answer. But I stood her gaze until, to my relief, it seemed satisfied. She answered: "Thank you, Binney."

And then I saw the girl, so oddly changeable, show her womanliness. For first she breathed: "That kind father!" And then—did not the tears start to her eyes?—"Your poor mother!"

Emotion was dangerous. I feared to stay, lest I betray too much. So I let the great fact explain itself, said my few words of thanks for sympathy, and forced myself away. I was glad to take this remembrance of her.

CHAPTER XXIII

BEFORE I went to my lodgings I sent a message to Joe, appointing an hour for him to lunch with me. And when my landlady had been paid, and my belongings packed and sent to the station, I met the good fellow at a restaurant, where for the last time (until my honeymoon) I ordered a city meal.

And Joe, kind soul, had slicked himself up, and sat on the edge of his chair, and was as satisfied as if he had been dining with his employer or some one who could be of use to him. Yet all these months Joe must have known that my fall was sure to come, unless I chose (bless him for his faith that I would not!) to give my soul to Mr. Worthen's keeping.

I could not long pretend that things had not changed with me. My spirits were not good; and besides, I saw Joe eying my sombre garb and trying to find courage to ask the reason for it. So I told him of my father's death, and added: "I must run the farm."

Though for my bereavement he was truly sorry, he could not help smiling with delight when I told him that I had broken with Mr. Worthen. He reached across the table and wrung my hand. "Binney, this is worth a good deal to me."

"Worth thirty thousand dollars to me," I answered. And so, reaching the point at last, I told him all my misfortunes.

It was not hard to confess to Joe, especially since, unconsciously assuming a thoroughly professional air, he set himself to listen intently. There are some men whose knowledge of the world comes early; it rises from insight rather than experience. I am no such man. Years hence, I suppose, I shall still be repeating the blunders of my youth, while my wise children regard me indulgently as hopeless. But Joe is of the sort who, once fairly started, seem to accrue sense as some men gain money. True, my haphazard roughness had been needed to free him from Stidger. But the boy in Joe, except for his diffident manner, was already dropping from sight. I perceived in him now a new quality of dependableness, and before I had finished the story of my interview with Mr. Worthen I felt that I was appealing for his advice.

"A very high-handed performance," he chuckled first. But then he asked pointedly: "You mean only to hold those papers over his head? Why not sue him for your money?"

"Plainly, Joe," I inquired, "what chance would I have?"

"Plainly, then," he returned, "very little. We know very well in our office how smart he is at evading such suits."

"But why," I demanded, "should he ever have treated me so?"

"Because you asked your money back," explained Joe. "And meanwhile he'd scattered it."

"Spent it?" I cried. "Wasn't it a mere nothing to him?"

Joe shook his head. "It's common knowledge that he's always on the edge. And it happens that just at present he's closer pressed than usual. That's why he turned on you—but it's also why he's willing to stand your assault on him this morning. Ordinarily he'd have you into court for it, and would exact every cent of the money he claims that you owe. But all winter he's been where to start one suit might have the result of starting a dozen against him. Some even say that the federal authorities are quietly looking into his operations."

I sat amazed. It was part of my happy innocence that these rumors had never come to me.

✓ "That's why," went on Joe, "you ought to have got his receipt in full, as you did for Mr. Canby. For, should his creditors sue him, his books might show that he had a claim on you."

"I might really be involved?" I asked.

"Leave that to me," he said. "Before night I will have his receipt for you."

Joe would have his receipt for me! And this was the boy I had protected, now protecting me. He thought it all over, then nodded positively: "You shan't be drawn into it at all. Unless you wish to begin it yourself."

"No," I said. "It would be a heart-breaking experience for mother, and sickening to drag through,

even for me." Then I thought further of Mr. Worthen's position, and asked: "If things go wrong with him, what will Gertrude do?"

"Why," answered Joe, "give Mr. Worthen a smart lawyer, and he'll be able to start again. His daughter will not suffer, especially since you don't intend to prove his treachery. Unless, of course, it's prison for him."

"Prison!" I cried.

"Why not?" he rejoined. "He's been ruining men for years. Shouldn't he taste a little of the disgrace and the despair?" He added practically: "He's liable enough."

Liable! I thought of Canby. Hard labor for life! I thought of my father in his grave, and became reconciled to the idea that the man at whose table I had sat should go to prison. Yet he was Gertrude's father!

"You couldn't prevent it, you know," remarked Joe, reading my face.

Indeed, I could not, and I turned from the subject. "Joe," I said, "you must be my lawyer in Boston, if ever I need one. I mean to give you a key to my vault box. You can put Mr. Worthen's receipt there."

"Very well," he agreed.

There being not too much time before departure, I called the waiter. Then, as I took out my purse to pay for the lunch, I was dismayed to find how little money I had: after tipping the man, there remained scarcely twenty dollars. I winced to

recognize that the old times had come again. I must pinch. No more free spending. Pocket-money was to be as nearly as possible like pocket-pieces, to be kept to look at. I had only a little money in the bank. What father had at home I did not know; but I wondered, with a strange feeling of emptiness after my hearty lunch, whether the seed and fertilizer which father had shown me stored at the barn had yet been paid for. I could never pay for it.

"Binney," asked Joe, who must have noticed my fascinated study of the slender purse, "have you got your pay from Mr. Worthen?"

"Why, no," I answered, surprised. "He hasn't paid me for two months." It was my reason, I now remembered, for having so little money at the bank.

"I'll look after that," said Joe competently.

"No!" I cried. "No money from him!"

"See here," and Joe assumed command. "If I'm your lawyer, you must do as I say. Of course you'll take his money."

"Think where he gets it," I protested. "It's blood-money!"

"If it is," returned Joe, "it was bled from you."

Therefore I acquiesced. I took Joe to the bank, made him free of my safe-deposit box, and after a hearty handshake left him.

My first impulse was to take a carriage to my train, my next to board a car. But then, believing myself to have plenty of time, I began the practice

of economy. A nickel was worth saving. So I walked.

It was thus that I met Denny. He came swinging along Washington Street, jaunty in his carriage, very loud of dress. I placed myself in his way. When he saw me he colored, sidestepped, and tried to pass. But I detained him.

"I'm in a hurry," he objected.

"There's always time to say good-by," I answered.

"So," said he, pausing perforce (for a hand on the arm is a good argument), "you've met your finish?" Then he bit his lip and looked away.

I laughed. "The truth was startled from you, Denny. So you knew I was down here for the purpose of scientific plucking?"

He would not meet my eye, but mumbled as he looked down: "I had nothing to do with it."

"And thanks to you for that," I answered. "But Denny, what next? Are you going to keep on helping at the miserable business of ruining the innocent?"

He grew defiant. "I simply buy and sell according to orders. No one can hold me liable."

"You never warned me, Denny," I said. "But I'm going to warn you. Remember this word that I say to you now. Conscience, man; conscience!"

He fell back and glared resentfully. "That's my affair," he mumbled.

I clapped him on the shoulder. "True. And I suppose no one, since you left your mother's side,

has interfered to prevent your helping at the devil's business. Go your own way, man. But, Denny, I challenge you to forget my warning."

So I left him, having committed the social sin of reminding him indirectly of God and, incidentally, of his mother. And falling into a slow step while I thought of his self-persuasion of innocence, and of how a man will deliberately shut his eyes to his responsibility, I so lost account of time that when I saw the station clock I stood disgusted at it. My train had gone.

But I thus was given time for taking farewell of the city. I walked to State Street, whose busy hum had not yet subsided, and I saw without bitterness those rapids of finance whence other men drew fish, but where I had lost bait and tackle. I went through the shopping district (where once or twice I had gone with Gertrude) and looked indulgently on the fripperies in the windows, because in their mysterious way they made the girls so fine. And I crossed the Common and the Garden, and looked for a time down the vista of the avenue, where the delicate green of the first buds made the trees begin to look alive. I saw a man and a girl go by whose engagement was expected soon; and I believed the rumor, for so absorbed in each other were they that they did not see me at all. I bowed to a carriage or two, then turned back, lest perchance I should see Gertrude again. I crossed Beacon Hill on my way to the station and, having time, took the roundabout route in front of the

State House, where I turned and looked back. I could see the Back Bay, and the shopping district, and Dorset my tailor's, and waved them all a good-by. I was finished, even if I was not cured. So I went and boarded my train, having under my arm my supper of rolls and cheese and chocolate, purchased at a grocery to save me from the expense of the dining-car.

As Bunker Hill monument glided out of my sight, reminding me of my first coming to the city, I felt a miserable sinking, not of the heart but of the stomach, which I am inclined to think is the organ of all unwelcome emotions. I was going away shorn; the farmer and his diamonds had been separated; there would be a week's gossip about me, and much wagging of heads. I tried to smile cynically; but I knew well enough where the fault lay and understood that the place where I should do least mischief was the farm. Also there was some relief in the idea of burying myself where even my townsfolk would be unable to point at me.

If there was one notion at which I could take any satisfaction, it was that the score between Gertrude and me stood a little in my favor. I had not bothered her with any good-bys; I had kept my secret from her, so that she need not despise her father on my account, for I felt pretty sure that the gossip concerning my plucking would be kept from her; people aren't so cattish as the novelists make out. Gertrude would feel vexed

at my boorishness in thus departing; but vexation would be a deal pleasanter than knowing the truth. And once a year I would send her a basket of apples, or some of our best butter, to give her distinctly to understand that I was a farmer now, and nothing more.

I see now the boyishness of this programme. It proves that I was miserably sore.

Our train was delayed by nearly an hour in reaching Athol, and as a consequence I reached home not far from midnight, for I had walked the seven miles, carrying my bag and umbrella and hold-all, a model of thrift. A hundred times I blessed the darkness that covered my fatigue and my shame. My arms and shoulders, back and legs, but above all my hands, continually gripping, were sore and cramped long before I had passed half the distance. Again and again I sat down to rest, and mopped my face in the frosty air, and thought of myself in my fine city clothes plodding thus through the country and coming back, a failure and a fool, to the life I had so confidently left. I was so soft from lack of exercise that when I reached the farm I fairly dragged myself through the yard on my way to the barn, for mother was asleep, and I would not rouse her. I entered the barn by the little door, dropped my bags, and, groping my way to the ladder that led to the loft, climbed it, and threw myself into the hay.

At first I was so tired that I could not sleep. I listened to the noises of the barn. One horse was

awake, champing, and then pausing to drag hay out of the rack. Some of the cows, too, were softly mumbling their cuds. But the heavy breathing of the others made a peaceful undertone that gradually calmed my senses. Here was I among the cattle, on the old farm. I felt like a little boy, and snuggled deeper, and dropped asleep.

CHAPTER XXIV

OUR big rooster waked me. I suppose a train might have thundered by and never roused me; but the suddenness of the shrill cockcrow opened my eyes. My surprise at seeing above me cob-webbed rafters, at finding the hay tickling me while I lay there fully dressed, finished the work of waking me. The last note of the call was still echoing in my brain while I scrambled to the ladder.

In the milkroom were the pails, scrubbed and ready for use. I looked in vain for overalls; and so, after a good wash at the pump, in my business clothes I fed the cows and sat down to the milking. It pleased me to suppose that the cows remembered me; at any rate, not one of them objected to my handling. And so I sat and listened to the streaming of the milk into the pail, and the contented munching of the beasts, until I felt myself humble and content, and fell to singing softly.

I was roused by the feeling that some one was near me and, turning my head, saw my mother standing a few feet away, watching me. "Hullo," I cried. "You see I got ahead of you."

"When did you come?" she asked.

I explained. "Amusing, eh?" She did not answer. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

Then, as I looked at her more closely in the dusky

passage, I saw that she was weeping. I sprang up. "Mother, what is wrong?"

"Oh, Binney," she cried, "to see you sitting there, in those clothes, and doing such work!"

"I will be in overalls next time," I said, "and that will be entirely natural. Good morning, mother." And I kissed her.

She clung to me, still weeping. "Oh, my dear boy, you ought to be in the city, at better work. Let us give up the farm. I'll go with you."

My heart leaped at the proposal, for I knew just how hard the lonely work was to be, compared with the pleasures of the city. But my shame was still strong; and (this credit I can claim for myself) I knew what the uprooting would mean to mother. I had done her harm enough. Here at least I could create and be a useful citizen.

"No, mother," I answered. "Here is the place for me."

She drew back and looked at me anxiously. "Binney," she asked, "you aren't hoping to find another box?"

"Not a bit," I assured her. "There probably won't be another in my lifetime."

Mother hesitated before her next question. "And that girl?"

Gertrude? "I am best out of her way," I answered. I meant, best for Gertrude, for I doubted if I could see her again without her worming from me the secret of my disaster. But mother thought I meant best for myself, and sighed, and looked

at me sorrowfully. Then she cried a little more, and was content.

But one thing she said with truth: "I have lost two of you, your father and yourself. For my boy has changed, and will never be the same again."

"I am both sore and sorry," I answered. "How, then, can I ever go back? But let us hope, mother, that your boy is on the way to becoming a man."

Thus the day began for me a new life, which had to be different from the old. I could look at nothing as before. One incident showed the difference as scarcely anything else could do. Rum-maging in my room, I came across the old knife which I had used when looking for treasure, and which I had been sharpening on that day when Stidger came for Joe. It was still keen from the grindstone and the hone, and I put it in my pocket because it might prove useful. But I knew I should be too busy to hunt for boxes; and besides, I dreaded the ill fortune which the next one might bring me.

That evening, though dog-tired from the unaccustomed work, I went with mother over father's accounts. It was with the greatest relief that I found all bills paid and about a hundred dollars in the bank. When the funeral expenses were discharged, I should still have something to the good. And mother acquiesced in my accepting the money which, in that day's mail, Joe sent me from Mr. Worthen.

"Besides," she said practically, "your treasure-find, in spite of all its harm, has left us something.

We are all painted and shingled afresh. You have the silo and the blower to fill it, and the engine. There are all the other new tools. Since you must work single-handed, these things will help you. And for me there is the new stove, and the washing-machine, and the sofa for my resting, and the new pots and pans and dishes. And great outfitting through the house. As if," mother added with a tremulous smile, "we foresaw that as money the fortune must go, but in other forms we might keep it."

Work pressed on me swiftly and heavily. My still soft muscles could hardly stand the strain of the next few days. Once after supper I laid my head on my arms at the table and slept till mother roused me at bedtime. And though I rose earlier than ever, and worked till I thought I should drop, I never properly finished the tasks of each day. And the ploughing, not yet begun, loomed up to appall me. Mother, when I told her of my dismay, gave me a reason.

"You've grown too thorough, Binney. We can't slick up the farm every day, like the desks in a city office. Your father was content to do the main part of the work and let the rest go. So must you."

But as I thought the matter over I reached a different conclusion. I was carrying too great a burden of work. There were too many cows: which of them were worth their keep? There were more horses than we needed: some of them must go.

More tillage was planned than one man could well maintain. The rest must go into hay—and lucky was I to have the new machinery. For not only had we the ordinary tools, from seeder to mower, but on my departure for the city father had bought loader and hoister of the best make, in order to do the work alone. We had plenty of storage room, and I could team our surplus to Athol in the winter, when work was slack and prices high. By such a scheme as this, I was likely to do better than father. So my first week of work, when I applied what little business training I had had, was very valuable to me. It paved the way to many labor-saving schemes and to methods of testing results, such as milk-weighing and ration experiments, and (in mother's domain) to trap-nests for the poultry. It all took time and thought, but led to many ideas and conclusions, yes, and to results which, if ever I should begin writing of them here, would thickly pad this book. I leave them, though unwillingly. For this part of my life is as real to me as any other, quite as critical, quite as desperately earnest. It should be interesting to any one else—if only I could make it so.

The time came to plough, and mother stood by to watch me get out the New Universal, bought in the fall, used now for the first time. Before I seeded any of the broken land, I was going to break a piece of old sod on the eastern slope, now well-drained but not too dry, and ready for the share. Mother had acquiesced in my plan for smaller tillage opera-

tions and bigger mowings, and now, I knew, breathed a prayer after me as I left the barnyard. My muscle was hard now. I knew my horses. And as I began the work and drove a furrow along the side of the ten-acre piece, and turning, saw that it was as straight as ever I made in my life, I on my part gave a little sob of thanksgiving and hope, a sob that surprised me by showing how deeply my heart was stirred by this beginning.

The work soon absorbed me, partly perhaps from its difficulty. I know that in favored localities (Concord, for example) the plough meets no obstruction, and a man digging is surprised and disgusted if anything stops his spade before reaching full depth. But in Petersham digging is slow on account of the stones, and the surprise is quite the other way. And though on the farm our walls testify to a century and a half of stone-clearing, and our smaller boulders are mostly blasted, stones from twenty to a hundred pounds weight seem continually to work up from below. When the plough meets them, sometimes in every other furrow, the ploughman must heave them to the surface (that is, if he wants to do a good job and to save risk to his harrow) and must set] them up on edge, to come for them later. It rests the horses but it tires the man, and it much delays the work. This morning I found plenty of such stones, in a field which had not been ploughed for a number of years. I was prepared for them, having, in sockets on my plough-handles, a spade and a short crowbar.

I ploughed and dug and pried and heaved without ceasing until I knew, as noon approached, that Cousin Lon himself could scarcely have done better. In Petersham he had the name of our best worker. With the thrust of an arm he did what an ordinary man would have to put his back into; his endurance was extreme. This last I had not gained. The afternoons were still very long for me, and for weeks yet I was to crawl home dog-tired, not yet able to prove, as my neighbors were doing daily, that in spite of the weight of his worries a man is a better animal than his horse or his ox. But I already felt my manhood coming upon me, for I guided my plough and wrestled with the stones with an unexpected ease and satisfaction.

I had planned to eat in the field, this being washing-day and one on which many of my city things had to be laundered for their long rest in my bureau. So to ease mother's labor I had taken my lunch with me. At noon I paused to gloat over the many furrows of black loam, where not a spear of grass showed, while here and there stood up the rugged stones, monuments of my achievements. I unhooked the flagging horses from the plough, changed their bridles for their feed-bags, and approached my own nook, where Jones guarded my lunch.

The tin pail stood in the shade, and I set beside it the dripping can which I brought from the spring close at hand. But a delicious odor arrested me as I prepared to sit, and I looked about me.

On a peeled apple-shoot, projecting from a crevice in the wall, hung a doughnut!

The crisp brownness, the smell, and indeed the very fact that it was there, meant Margery. Mother seldom made doughnuts, and then apologetically, as it was hopeless to compete with Margery, who never made a batch without saving some for me. In fact, mother's cooking, good as it was, and far above the average to be met with on our farms, was rather a triumph of intellect, as befitting one trained for a schoolmistress, than an emanation, such as is the spontaneous product of genius. Margery had a feminine instinct for clothes, for cooking, and for comfort.

So she had stolen up and stolen away? Jones would have given tongue at any one else except mother, and here he lay, wagging as if at a joke.

But stay. That long red tongue was reminiscently licking. Could Margery be far away?

He raised himself on his forepaws, wagging very actively. His eye strayed to a little patch of scrub.

"Find her!"

In a flash he had rounded it, and I heard his delighted yelps. There I found Margery, holding high above him a paper parcel at which he was hopefully slobbering.

"One more for Jones," she said, emerging. "And a total of four for you, being quite enough for one meal. And may I sit with you while you eat, Binney?"

Might she! But she had to repeat her question

before I answered it. For her personality, as Gertrude's once before, suddenly possessed me. She was like a little brown thrush in the neatness of her monotone. Her dress was a plain, serviceable gingham, finely checked, simply girt, and with no ornament except, at the throat, a simple gold pin of her mother's. But the dress wonderfully set off the trigness of her figure.

I am not so foolish as to contend that Margery was unaware how simplicity became her. Further, nature was good to her, I admit, in waving her hair and in curling those tendrils that escaped at temples and at nape, so that the small shapely head seemed always to be adorned: a compensation to busy Margery as against Gertrude, who had the leisure to frizz her otherwise lank locks. Now, Margery could go out in any weather and take no thought of it. In slicker and sou'wester she was a very wholesome sight.

And just now this wholesomeness, and the steadfastness that gazed out of her brown eyes and was ensconced in the short, round chin and the lips that were both sweet and firm, seemed specially evident. I was absorbed, so that she had to repeat, in some surprise, her question:

"Mayn't I sit with you?"

So I welcomed her.

It was pleasant to have her there with me, seated half facing, so that I could view her without turning. She had had her lunch, but admitted some interest in mine, for she nibbled at the bread and

cheese and took toll of mother's pie. But she soon came to business, for she said: "You don't inquire to what you owe the honor of this visit."

"Now, Margery!" I exclaimed, crestfallen, "I was enjoying the idea that you came just for the fun of it."

She shook her head. "Too busy. But father was over in the wood-lot, and I wanted to see you by yourself, because I've had a letter from Gertrude." And she drew it from her pocket.

"You've hurt her feelings," reproached Margery. "You left the city without good-by, and here she has only just found—that is, two or three days back—that you have gone. She wants an explanation."

"Then you must give me your advice," I said.

She listened very gravely while I told why I had fled from Gertrude's inquisitiveness, fearing to let her know that her father had robbed me. ("She doesn't know," interjected Margery. "That explains a good deal.") I went on, rather reluctantly, to expound my theory that Gertrude was well quit of me; but I showed that I felt myself virtuous in sparing her. Whereat Margery frowned.

"But is it friendly?" she asked. "Gertrude has been kind to you; few girls could or would have done so much. You can't drop her without another word."

I asked her what I should do.

"Write to her," said Margery firmly. "You need say no more than good-by, but you can at least say that."

She was right, and I promised it.

"She has something else on her mind," Margery went on, "but I can't make it out. I half believe it's the real occasion of her letter. She says she's afraid of something her father may do; she'd tell you if you were there; but perhaps nothing may come of it after all. And then she closes rather abruptly. Perhaps you can see to what she refers."

I couldn't. Unless, I thought, Gertrude wishes to toll me back again, the coquette. But I couldn't suggest this to Margery. So I repeated that I couldn't see to what she referred, since I felt myself free from her father's clutches. I had the papers and accounts; Joe had got me his receipt: Mr. Worthen could not lay hand on me. Yes, but I counted that he could do me no purely malicious mischief, which I soon learned to be my great mistake.

It was now that Jones growled. And we saw, coming into the field at the lowered bars, a man on horseback. He did not at first see us, but paused and scanned the field. Margery and I knew him at first glance. No one else that we had ever seen dressed so trimly or rode so precisely, or had a horse so perfectly shaped and neatly accoutred. And while I sat wondering what should bring Colleston there, and whether perhaps Gertrude had come also, Margery sprang to her feet and called and waved to him.

He rode to us with a deliberation that seemed expressed by the gait of his horse, which, being

used to level going, had to be urged over the furrows. And, though when the rider came near he lifted his hat, Margery turned to me with swift, surprised questioning at his grave face. He greeted us, at close hand, very kindly; but, though I asked him to dismount, he still sat his horse.

"I'm here for only a few minutes," he said. "I must get myself and my horse on the freight-train that starts from Athol before three. But I have a message for Mr. Hartwell."

"I'll go away," said Margery quickly, while I was still wondering at his intention to travel in a box-car.

"Really," responded Collester, "I think you'd better hear it, too."

We stood waiting, while he, sitting above us, seemed to be searching for the right beginning. And once again I gave him my grudging admiration, not only for his lack of concealment of his embarrassment, but presently for the direct simplicity with which he stated his errand.

"I saw Miss Worthen three days ago. She was troubled because she had let slip to her father the fact that the old copy of your ancestor's will had been destroyed."

"Destroyed!" breathed Margery, startled.

She gave me one quick, searching look. She never asked me what had happened; but seeing that I was not surprised, and connecting Gertrude with the affair, she simply accepted the fact and worked forward from it.

I tried to think. This must be what Gertrude had referred to in her letter. Had she told Collester how the copy had been burnt? How much of a grudge had her father against me? And would he gratify it by telling Stidger?

Margery, more quickly, since she had more to adjust herself to, came to the same point, but more positively.

"What," she asked, half to herself, "will Mr. Stidger do?"

"What can he do?" I demanded.

"A good deal," replied Collester.

I looked at him, puzzled.

"You both thought of Stidger," said he. "So did Gertrude. So did I. And I wanted to know why he should want to get in his hands the mere copy of a will. So I went to Worcester, to the register of probate of this county, and asked to see the original will. And there was no original."

"None?" I cried.

"None!" he answered positively. "A fire some forty years ago destroyed many records of the first quarter of the century. And Stidger knows this. Within a week after your find, last fall, he was inquiring for the original will."

I stood confounded.

"And unless there are other copies," pursued Collester, with an inexorable completeness, "or unless there are enough witnesses to establish the conditions of the old will, Mr. Alonzo Hartwell would stand a good chance of winning a suit for

the recovery of the gems which were found in his wall."

"Our copy is lost!" cried Margery. "It hasn't been seen for many years. I searched the house for it last fall, when Mr. Stidger was so anxious to see Binney's."

"We were to have had Mr. Worthen make a copy of ours," I supplemented, "but Stidger never asked for it and so it never was made."

"Who has seen your copy?" asked Collester.

"I never read it," said Margery. "Even father knew the terms only by hearsay."

"Gertrude had not read it," added Collester.

"Mother has read it," said I. "And I can almost say it by rote."

"You are interested parties," replied Collester. "Who else?"

"Stidger himself."

"Will lie," commented Collester.

"And finally Mr. Worthen," I added. "That's all."

Collester shook his head. "If Mr. Worthen tells this news to Stidger, we may be sure that he is prepared to give shuffling witness in court. Therefore," and Collester looked at Margery, "if Stidger begins again to hang about your father, it will be common sense to bring all possible influence to bear on the other side."

It was his simple assumption that Margery would stand against her own worldly interest.

"Oh!" she cried, with sudden tears in her eyes,

"I cannot be sure of my influence over father." She was distressed beyond measure.

"But, Mr. Collester," I demanded, "will it count for nothing that the two families have always acted on the terms of the will as I can state them, that the whole town believes in them, and that no claim was made on me when I first found the box?"

"That is your line of defense," answered Collester. "But it is a very pretty tangle. Given a clever lawyer for the claimant, and persistence on both sides, and before many years the value of both farms will be eaten up by fees."

Margery spoke. "I will do my best." She began to dry her eyes.

As for me, rather than complain of this trap in which I found myself, I set my teeth and said nothing. Then Collester gathered up his reins.

Even before I could stretch out my hand to prevent him (for surely there was more to say) Margery seized the bridle. "Mr. Collester," she cried, "you have done all this travelling and inquiring, and have brought this warning, just for us!"

He answered: "As soon as I suspected the situation, there was nothing else to do."

It was plain that he had acted on his own accord, not on Gertrude's orders. At any rate, so Margery thought, for she said: "You could simply have left it alone."

With a serious smile he shook his head. "Not with you two good people so unsuspecting here."

And he pointed to our peaceful valley. Then, as if his glance was caught by the beauty of the scene, he sat in momentary quiet and mused upon it.

Between perplexity and gratitude (which I never found easy of expression) I was tongue-tied. And besides, an urgent question puzzled me. Why should he have done so much? Why was it for me rather than for Margery? I knew it to be so. Why was it?

Then, recalling himself, with a very kindly smile he turned to me. "If ever you need to fight, let me help." He held out his hand for good-by.

At this last expression of good-will my throat became unmanageable, and I could only wring his hand. I think he saw my difficulty, for after but a look he turned to Margery. She, too, could only press his hand—but though our difficult farewell was voiceless, it was expressive. He turned his horse, raised his hat, and cantered away, while we stood gazing.

Not until he was gone from sight did we two look at one another. Then said Margery: "Father might take away your farm, Binney." For, of course, there was nothing else with which to pay a judgment against me.

I could not make the cruel answer that she, at least, would be so much better off, for such a change I knew she would count as a loss. So I told her that I could make a home for mother elsewhere.

She answered passionately that I should not

have to. Yet the very extremity of her feeling betrayed her doubt; and when she almost abruptly left me I knew that she as well as I could not bear to speak of the future.

CHAPTER XXV

THAT was a refined torture which set the Sicilian flatterer under a sword hanging by a hair, to study a prince's feeling of security. Suspense! For weeks I was doomed to it.

On that afternoon of bad news I finished my ploughing at five, and went home to the chores. That day I felt no fatigue: the new worry keyed me up. The chores finished, while mother was still cooking supper I shaved, dressed for riding, and sat down to write Gertrude a masterpiece of a letter, brief and cutting.

"Going riding?" asked mother when again I came to the kitchen.

"It's time I came out of my shell," I replied. "I'm going to the post-office to-night."

"I knew that something had happened," said mother, quiet and very certain. "Tell me." So I told her all the story, from the burning of the will (which till now I had suppressed) to Colleston's news.

I think it was not till then that I understood mother's great self-command. At father's death the torture of my conscience, together with my anger at Mr. Worthen, had blinded me to everything outside myself. But now I was able to recognize what the new danger must mean to mother,

so deeply centred in the farm. She had no other place to turn to, for her childhood's home had long been broken up. But she took the news very quietly.

"Let us remember," she said, "that to leave the farm is a plan which we have already once considered."

"But I have fought one fraud against our ownership," I groaned. "I hate to yield to another."

"We will yield," decided mother calmly, "if the first decision goes against us. Appeals may take ten years of your life, and then what are you but a soured and quarrelsome man? And what of the peace of my old age?"

I knew that she was right, and even high-minded. But I could not help suggesting: "The last two boxes?"

"Ah, Binney," said mother pityingly, "are you counting on those?"

"Mother!" I cried, "you know I haven't looked once since I returned. But they lie here somewhere. Some chance——"

"It is the gambler's word," interrupted mother. "And seventy years of chance have passed them by. Will you set your life on the turn of the wheel, or will you make your own fortune?"

She shamed me, and I submitted.

"And now," she said, "will you show me your letter to Gertrude, unless it is too private?"

I handed it to her, and she read it slowly. Then she shook her head. "Burn it, my boy," she said

as she handed it back. "Letters are terrible things. I don't know your feeling for Gertrude, but you mustn't put on paper a hint of a reproach for an act that can't be repaired."

I felt this, and admitted it, and burned the letter. Then after supper I wrote Gertrude a cheerful good-by, told her that I was doing well, and mounted Peter for my ride to the post-office.

Since my return I had not once been there, for I had dreaded facing my townsmen at the common meeting-place. Margery had brought our mail, or occasionally mother had driven to the store. But if ever I was to meet my neighbors, I might as well begin.

Folks are usually kind. If there were nudgings and whisperings while I did mother's errands, I was not aware of them. The postmaster shook my hand and spoke of father; the clerks, old friends of mine, welcomed me back and hoped that I could pitch for the nine whose practice was to begin as soon as the rush of spring work was over. So as I cantered homeward in the fine, bright evening I felt that the world was friendly.

And then, as I neared Cousin Lon's driveway, a ramshackle buggy turned out of it into the road before me, and headed toward Athol. Its occupant was narrow-shouldered and shabby; clear-cut against the fading sky I saw the fuzz of his hat-brim. Stidger! So Mr. Worthen had told! And I drew rein.

Then there came to me, on the quiet air, his flatted whistle.

I stood still and let him pass on. He had not seen me. But trust in the kindness of the world fell away from me; darkness came over my soul. When I saw our house again it was no pleasure to me, for I was going to lose it. I stabled Peter and walked wearily indoors. At my face mother exclaimed, and I told her what I had seen.

"Binney," she gently reproached me, "already losing heart?"

"But he was whistling," I replied.

"Still," returned mother, "your cousin Lon can't have agreed instantly. Cheer up!"

"If I saw anything to do!" I complained. "I can't appeal to Cousin Lon."

"You can," answered she. "You can believe in him till he turns against you. Begin at once. Go to his house, be friendly, and let him see that you trust him."

"If he will only let me show it!" I groaned. But I saw her good sense and took a little of her courage.

Now I had, among the books which in my extravagance I had bought in Boston, some very good tales. Kipling was in those days at the first ascent of his fame, and Stevenson's death had set us all to buying sets of his works. So "Soldiers Three" and "Kidnapped" I tucked under my arm and in the dusk set out for the other farm, depending on the young moon to light me home through the woods, and leaving Jones to take care of mother. Margery's house was dark and grim in front; but I had seen the gleam in the kitchen window and,

as we do in the country, went to the back door. No formality of entrance in Boston ever troubled me as did this approach to this other home of my childhood, until I remembered that I should merely do as usual, and so knocked as I opened the door.

Margery sprang up from her reading and, knowing who it must be, ran to greet me. A glance beyond her showed Cousin Lon, hastily shoving something under a newspaper that lay on the table. I thought Margery's cordiality was somewhat apprehensive, and her talk intended to give her father time. Cousin Lon pushed up his spectacles on his forehead and, having concealed his occupation, turned in his chair and told me to come in.

I suppose he thought me very young and foolish. Like all the Hartwells, I had lost my money. Like any youth, I had as yet no judgment. I was the only one in town who could ever rival him in strength. All these things must have often been in his mind as he considered me. I know he thought of them now as he moved to the window and took out his pipe.

It is a miserable endeavor, the attempt to interest an elder who has little in common with the younger generation. Efforts at conversation are so easily snubbed. The old know more of the signs of the weather, of farming, of business, of politics. On most matters they have formed a settled judgment, against which the comments of the young seem impertinent, or at least callow. The best working arrangement is polite abstraction. In his home Mr. Worthen had seemed to

regard Gertrude and me as kittens gambolling on the hearth. Never again, by heaven, would he think of me as harmless. But to-night Cousin Lon's heavy silence was more forbidding. I was a mosquito. Let me not buzz too near!

"I have brought Margery a couple of books," I said. "Perhaps, Cousin Lon, they will interest you, too."

He did not look at me, but continued filling his pipe. "I seldom read."

Now, farmers have a great contempt for improving literature, especially if it deals with farming. I hastened to add: "They're merely stories."

"Stories never," he said shortly, and struck a match.

"Kipling I know," said Margery, busy with the books. "But who is this man Stevenson?"

Now, though R. L. S. was so long before the American public, he was new to me. I had my first enthusiasm to aid me in telling Margery about him, and in fighting against the silence of the gaunt figure in the window. If it heard me, it gave no sign.

Now in telling Margery about Stevenson, the thought of "Treasure Island" rose constantly to my mind, and I had hard work to keep it out of my speech. That tale of hidden treasure, won from buccaneers, ought not just now to be mentioned before Cousin Lon, though I resolved that Margery should see the book at our house, and read it there, if she would. In fact she did so, for, having

once dipped into it, she ran over twice in working hours (entirely wrong, but she declared she could not help it), and read the book intensely until she had finished. Our affair, she said to me with a sigh, was different. If we had had the crew of the *Walrus* prowling about our farms, we might have called in the constable.

This evening, however, I talked of "Kidnapped" and its sequel, of the "Master," of "Ebb-Tide," and of the brilliance of Stevenson's style as a virtue quite additional to the interest of his tales. Margery listened willingly. But Cousin Lon never turned his head, nor asked a question, nor gave any sign that he heard. And after some twenty minutes, deciding that I would trouble him no more, in fact beginning to appear to myself like a puppy yapping near a mastiff, I said good night and went to the door.

Margery stepped out with me, and after closing the door behind her she whispered eagerly: "Come again, and come often. It is the best way for you to soften him."

"I saw that Stidger came," I said. "What did they do?"

"Father has taken his papers and is looking them over. But that needn't mean anything. Good night."

I trudged home, to tell mother that her wisdom had agreed with Margery's. I slept better than I expected.

But the sword was hung over my head, and the

danger was never out of my mind. Every day's work at ploughing or seeding might be for the benefit of some one else—and of whom? If it should all go to Margery and Cousin Lon, I could reconcile myself. But I had concluded that Stidger was merely working for himself, and that he would put in so large a bill for services that Cousin Lon, unable to pay, would have to give him some hold upon our farm. And that would be unbearable.

For now I hated Stidger quite as much as I had formerly despised him. I had thought him a jackal; he proved to be a hyena. He had smelt blood, he had traced it out, he was prowling for a taste of it—my blood! My work might go to him. Every acre that I was ploughing and harrowing and seeding might be reaped by him. The buildings that I had painted, the stock that I had bred, would be for him to swagger about and gloat over. And the miserable scavenger, who so far had earned no more than pickings, might not merely have our farm to feed him well, but also might some day happen upon our treasure.

The thought would have soured me, but for mother's steadfastness. I never went out to my work, nor came back to my meals, without a draft of courage from the well of hers. And knowing that in working so much alone I was in danger of brooding, she warned me plainly of it, so that when I found myself fretting I could help myself.

Nevertheless, my temper grew somewhat savage at times, the more so as my strength grew on me.

It took but a fortnight of the work of ploughing and stone-hauling to get me in condition for the heaviest and most continuous labor. I worked more hours, and did more in each. One day I teamed oats from Athol, and as mother watched me carrying the bags into the feed-room, one in each hand, she exclaimed in surprise at me. I was afraid to tell her that at the bottom of these new achievements of mine was a feeling of evil will. As I pitched a bag of oats onto the feed-room floor I wished it were Stidger; as I heaved a two-hundred pound stone onto the stone-boat I said: "Take that, rat!"

While the time dragged, mother and I made it our affair to maintain good relations with Cousin Lon. Several times a week one or the other of us was at his house for a few minutes' chat. He avoided us if he could; yet, unobtrusively doing as we had always done, we kept our claims before him.

Poor Margery could tell us nothing. She always stole out for a word on the door-step, and sometimes came over to see us. Her sympathies were clearly ours. "But what can I do?" she asked. "He always puts me off. But he reads all Stidger's letters carefully and listens to everything he says."

"Margery," I asked one day when I was walking home with her, "doesn't he talk to you about it at all?"

"I never knew him so silent," she answered. "Even when I become desperate and tell father that Stidger is merely working for himself, he mut-

ters things I cannot hear and says nothing more. It irritates him if I ask him to repeat. Binney, what can you do with a man if you don't know what he's thinking?"

She was silent for a few moments, then spoke in her father's defense. "He's always been kind to me before. I suppose it's the strength of the temptation."

When I saw tears in her eyes, there began to dawn upon me the hardship of her position. "Margery," I said with some wonder, "I believe you're in quite as much difficulty as we."

"It is not easy, at any rate," she answered, "when your own father is likely to do wrong!"

Now the wrong was such as the law might permit, and I pointed this out to her. Yet we both had our opinion as to the right of it. And this unity with Margery was most comforting to me. I told her so, holding her hand at parting. "You're as good as a sister."

I thought her inattentive. "Indeed?" she asked absently, withdrawing her hand. "Well, good-by, Binney. Let's hope things will improve."

Trying thus to hope, I went about my daily work, always taking comfort that nothing had yet been done. April passed into May, and May into early June, so that the ball games had begun—of which I had to content myself with seeing only an inning or two, no longer having time to play, much less to practise. The farm was doing well, for the seedlings had rooted deep in father's rich fertilizer,

the fruit-trees had blossomed finely, and everything was coming on fast. But still I had the uncomfortable knowledge that Stidger came almost weekly to talk with Cousin Lon.

At last I met him, a memorable meeting. I was on the way to town to get the evening mail, when I happened to note, on a low shoot of wild cherry, a nest of tent-caterpillars. At such a time of day the loathsome things were of course at home; so, getting down from Peter, I drew my heavy knife and cut the shoot. A flat stone and a little pounding despatched the pests; then I rode on. A quarter-mile farther on I found another nest; but on dismounting and reaching for my knife, it was missing. Jolted, I supposed, from my pocket.

On foot I went back, Peter docilely following. It was not yet dusk, and as I went I made sure that I did not pass the knife. As far as the corner by which I had so startled Joe the knife was nowhere; then I turned the corner and saw Stidger walking toward me. A rod beyond him was the bush at which I had cut the branch. I scanned the roadside. The gutters had been recently scraped, everything was bare, and the big knife was not visible. There was but one inference.

I stood in Stidger's way. "It's mine," I said.

He stopped. "Good evening. What did you say?"

Now courtesy was not in his line, and therefore his good manners were suspicious. The surer did I feel that the knife was in his pocket. "If you look

at the knife that you've found," I explained, "you'll find my initials on the handle."

A very superior smile. "You have a knife," said he, his pale, thin lip curling nastily, "that you have a habit of sharpening to threaten visitors with. Is that the one you've lost?"

I laughed. "I suppose we mean the same one, since you recognize it. May I have it?"

My good nature must have jarred on him. His irregular and untidy teeth showed as his lip curled farther. "I've found nothing." Then he bristled. "Stand out of my way!"

"Just a moment," I said, and remained, regarding him.

I was half inclined to take him and search him. The day was to come when I was to wish I had done so. But now the pleasure of watching his eyes grow redder, and his strained lip paler, and his tense figure begin to shake, quite overcame my desire to recover the knife. Besides, I had been a little ashamed of carrying around so dangerous an implement, useless since I no longer kept up my old-time search. The loss, therefore, looked a little like good riddance.

"Mr. Stidger," I said genially, "I'll give it to you."

"Give!" he sneered. "Confound you, some day I'll give you something that you'll not want."

I wished to make him betray himself. "Explain," I begged.

But seeing his indiscretion, he exploded in one

of his sudden passions. "Stand back and let me pass!" And as if he considered himself a steam-roller he advanced upon me.

I took him by the breast of his jacket.

Now I have wrestled and have had my tussles with my fellows, but always in sport. Never before had I felt the strange temptation that sprang from thus having in my grip a man who hated me, and whom I despised. As he strained to get away from me, his little swelling ribs felt like a frail basket beneath my knuckles. With a twist of my wrist I could crack that scrawny framework of his. And suddenly, in preparation for the effort, of itself my arm grew rigid.

"Stand still!" I warned him. The devilish temptation was stronger every moment.

He ceased struggling. Whether he sensed his risk or felt the pressure, he was panting. And seeing fear creep into his eyes, so that he hung back from me, I too was afraid, and let him go.

"I suppose I understand your threat," I said, ashamed at the tingling of my nerves and glad that I had not hurt him. "Do what you can, Stidger. You've got a clear field for your dirty work."

Without a word he slipped past me and hurried on. I felt very cheap. Such actions would do me no good.

Indeed, they would not. Margery came the next day to reproach me. "Oh, Binney, how could you?

Of course you didn't attack Mr. Stidger in the road, but you have given him a chance to make father think you did."

Mother, who had heard my story and disapproved of it, now like a true parent tried to come to my defense. But Margery would not listen. "Don't you see," she demanded, "that Binney has simply given the man another means of prejudicing father against him?"

"But," I mumbled, shamefaced, "it has no real bearing on his claim for the jewels."

"Even so," retorted Margery, "every little thing counts just now." She began to plead. "Oh, Binney, won't you let him entirely alone?"

Of course I promised. I would do anything possible to keep Cousin Lon from making his final decision against me. But now the end was near, for, as it appeared, Stidger had another method of approach.

Two nights later I went over for a chat with Margery. It was nearing dusk, but in the dim kitchen the lamp had not been lighted. "Hullo, everybody," I said as I stood in the doorway. When I got no immediate answer, though I plainly heard Margery busy at something, I sensed that something was wrong.

It was scarcely a long second before she answered "Hullo, Binney," yet in her voice, strained in the effort to be natural, I found reason for my alarm. Still fumbling with something, she added, "Wait a moment," and at last struck a match. And

then I saw before me a little figure that, being entirely new to me, amazed me quite.

A child of eight—no, perhaps of ten. She stood by the table, the light full on her sweet, pale face, showing her pinched yet pretty features trembling with a smile of habitual shy apology. Her large, dark eyes revealed a pathetic intensity of timid friendliness. And around this appealing countenance curled and hung so much fair hair as to make the head seem much too large for the frail body that supported it.

As I smiled at the little one, who instantly, beamingly, responded, I said to myself, reassured: "Nothing is wrong, after all."

"You have a visitor," I said aloud.

"We have visitors," returned Margery.

Disagreeably jarred, I looked toward the windows. Both of them were occupied. Cousin Lon in his shirt-sleeves filled the breadth of one as he looked out at the sky and smoked imperturbably. And in the other window was that well-known narrow figure, with one sharp shoulder turned toward me, and the buzzard head stiffly turned away.

I managed to greet them. In response, the one grumbled and the other growled. And then I turned to the child: "This is——?"

"Bertie Stidger," she answered. Her gentle pipe was as sweet as the note of a song-sparrow, and as I held out my hand she put her little one confidently in it. But her father called harshly:

"Bertie, come here!"

She went, reluctant but docile. And Margery touching me on the arm, I slipped out with her into the golden dusk. In silence we put the breadth of the yard between us and the house. Then, leaning on the bars of the lane and watching the dying gleam in the west, we spoke.

"You see!" said Margery.

"Tell me about it," I urged.

"I had no time to warn you," she explained. "It wasn't till father got home from his work to-day that he looked round the kitchen and asked: 'Isn't she here?' So I found I had missed a note of his, which in the morning he had left tucked away where I did not see it. Mr. Stidger had asked that the child might spend a week with us. He's troubled for her health down in that hot valley."

"Hm!" I doubted. And yet I thought of the frailty of the little being.

"Binney," said Margery earnestly, "he's fond of her."

"He calls her like a dog," I said.

"That was because you were there. When only I am by he speaks to her gently."

"And that is because you are there," I retorted. "He expects, apparently, to spend the night."

"Yes," admitted Margery. "He came driving over with her, not an hour ago. And he asked if he himself might stay a day or two, just to make sure that she was all right, and so that she shouldn't be homesick. Father agreed as if he didn't know

how to refuse, and yet as if he knew what would be the result of consenting."

I, too, knew the result and patted her shoulder. "Good little Margery. You have worked hard for us."

She answered pathetically: "I have been so baffled." And she sought her handkerchief.

I went home expectant of the end. But a day passed, and two, and nothing happened. Then on the third day Margery came slipping over to tell us that Stidger had gone to Athol, leaving the child behind him.

"It must be," she said hopefully, "that we have escaped after all."

It was for this reason that on the following evening mother and I together went over to call. But Stidger had returned. He and Cousin Lon sat in their windows in a glum silence and paid us no attention—which was so rude, even for them, that I felt a sudden disgust at my soft and feminine policy.

"If you went for your mail, I'm sorry," said Margery. "I have it here. Just a long envelope from Athol."

Had I guessed what the cheap brown envelope contained, I should have been able to read, in the attitudes of the men in the windows, not rudeness, but suspense lest I should open it at once. But thinking it to bring merely an advertisement, I opened it, intending to glance at the contents and stuff them in the stove.

But I found a very legal statement that suit had been entered against me for the value of gems found on my cousin's land and wrongfully taken therefrom.

So at last the sword had fallen. Yet after all, I scarcely felt the blow. For looking at my cousin's figure, tense and, I thought, shrinking in his chair, I felt that he was the one to be harmed by this. Morally, what else could happen?

I thought of sparing Margery by saying nothing—yet already, reading something in my looks, she was gazing at me in quick apprehension. Therefore I spoke:

"And so, Cousin Lon, you have done it at last!"

Margery turned like a flash, and her cry of "Father!" rang in the room. Before it we were all silent for a moment. Yet Cousin Lon began heavily lumbering from his chair; and Stidger came bustling forward.

"It was my letter, not his. Everything is now in my charge."

I continued to look at my cousin. "The responsibility is yours, sir. And how can you face your neighbors?"

He could not face even me. Poor Cousin Lon had no hardihood in his mischief; his glance turned from me to mother, and from mother to the floor, and stayed there. As for me, I felt a sudden lift of my spirits.

"Why, mother!" I cried, "we need not even

reproach him. He knows already what it is to be in the wrong. Come away."

But Margery was crying on mother's shoulder. And Stidger, fuming, came snapping out remarks, from which I gathered that he was trying to order us from the house. But when I looked at him he drew back.

"Quiet, little man," I said. "To-morrow is your day, and all the days that come after. But Cousin Lon, take a good look at the miserable creature that you are trusting yourself to."

Now Margery fled away up-stairs, and I drew mother out of the house. She walked for a long time beside me very sadly, but at last for the life of me I could not help whistling. Mother looked at me in surprise.

"Why," I explained, "it's a real fight now. I'm glad the waiting is over."

CHAPTER XXVI

I WROTE to Collester, enclosing the notice of the suit and asking for help. The answer, arriving in twenty-four hours, was brief and to the point. He was sorry; he would do his best. And next day, who should come driving into our yard but Joe?

"Rascal!" I cried as I hauled him from the buggy. "Where is your bag?"

It was in the back of the carriage; he had come from Collester; would we take him in? If he found a box he'd shut his eyes and walk away.

"With it under your arm, I hope," answered I. "Why, how light your suitcase is!"

"You see," explained the simple fellow, "I don't dress as much as you do."

"Indeed!" I mocked. "And look at me now." For beside my overalls his store clothes were elegant. I felt very much set up by this visit. And after I had established him in his old room, and while mother was frying potatoes for supper, I sat him down by the kitchen window and told him to give an account of himself.

Now the sound of frying potatoes is a pleasant undertone to chat. To be sure, the occasional snaps do interrupt; but, on the whole, the pleasant hiss helps talk, on account of the suggestion of the

meal to come. Both Joe and I love mother's fried potatoes; so, as we used to do months before, we sniffed the aroma and let the pleasant sibilance tickle our ears while we talked. And mother, while busy at the stove, and sometimes sending a fragrant cloud to the ceiling when she turned the potatoes, listened closely.

"I'm sent here for business," began Joe, with a satisfaction that even his modesty could not disguise. "Mr. Colleston was good enough to say that he had seen in me signs of—well, signs, you know."

"Of application, and keenness, and common sense," said I. "I know. He's slow in discovering them. Go on."

Blushing, Joe proceeded: "He seemed to think that on account of local knowledge and familiarity with Stidger's methods, and being unlikely to attract attention, I could help him here. And so I'm promoted!"

I asked him what he was to do.

"Get evidence. You know," he explained, "that there are plenty of old-timers, not only in Peter-sham but also in Athol, to whom the provisions of the Hartwell will are a matter of household religion. I know some of these men myself. There may be some who can even remember the previous find, on your land and by the other family, forty years ago, and who will know whether the question of ownership was then raised. I must find all these men and have a talk with each one."

"Mr. Worthen," I remarked, "will be on Stidger's side."

"Not so certain," answered Joe. "The gentleman is in difficulties." He explained that claims had been made against Mr. Worthen which he had had to satisfy and hush up; two suits had been entered against him; there had come the collapse of one of his favorite companies.

"Not Cloudburst Canyon?" I demanded, certain rumors, after lying inert in my brain for months, suddenly making an impression.

Smashed, answered Joe. And there was much unpleasant feeling among Mr. Worthen's clients when the fact leaked out that he owned none of the stock. And now while, with much difficulty, Mr. Worthen was trying to satisfy his claimants and to stave off other suits, Colleston was employed in what we nowadays call watchful waiting, to see whether matters would turn out to my advantage.

"What he hopes," Joe concluded, "is to find Mr. Worthen in such a mood that he can persuade him to testify in your favor. If Mr. Worthen will, then your suit is as good as won. If not, then——!"

"Lost?" I asked.

"No," answered Joe. "Otherwise I should not be here. Now of course Mr. Colleston hasn't explained to me all that he has in mind. But it wouldn't be hard for him to prove that Mr. Worthen's word isn't worth taking."

"A nice thing to make public," I remarked, "if you happen to be a friend of his daughter."

"Exactly," agreed Joe. "Where did you get your pull with him, Binney, to make him take your suit at such a time?"

My pull with Collester! There was no such thing, as the backwoodsman cried when he first saw a camel. Yet there the thing was, to be wondered at. There was either a great power of principle in the man or a great kindness toward me. Which, or both? I could not explain.

To have Joe with us again was very pleasant. He was our good old Joe, and yet he was different, as I had already in part learned. His character was emphasized by the solidity of his new acquirements. These I was abashed to contemplate. In my six months of city life I had learned only to dance, to chat, and to wear good clothes—was still a fool in all serious matters. And here was Joe, his simplicity unspoiled, and yet his shrewdness well-developed on the double basis of study of men and study of law. His evening classes had done well by him, but he had done still better by himself. Though still weedy in growth and diffident in manner, Joe was, as a keen look into his eyes would show, very dependable.

I had lately been making my saddle-horse, Peter, into a roadster for our buggy. His first youth now passing, he had taken very kindly to the new order, and was convenient for Joe's service. Among our solid citizens Joe soon proved to be very welcome, first for father's sake, afterward for his own, as his respectful manner and sensible questions recom-

mended him. When possible, I went with him. And on one of these expeditions we met Stidger.

We were in Athol, and had just finished a comforting talk with old John Wyman, born and brought up in Petersham, now prosperous in Athol. His clear memory of the finding of the Flat Round Box in 1854, his indignation at my cousin's suit, and his contempt for the person of Stidger, were quite fresh in our minds when, going out to the horse, we met Stidger on the sidewalk. Or rather, Joe met him; for I, standing on the steps and just closing the door behind me, was not in Stidger's vision.

He stopped short. That he had not yet heard of Joe's coming was plain from his first words. "Well, what brought you back? The city was too much for you, hey?"

If anything could show one aspect of Joe's character, it was the fact that he was not boiling with resentment at the sight of his old master. And if anything could show Joe's development, it was the quietness with which he confronted Stidger. He merely said: "It's a rather big place."

"Got new clothes," sneered Stidger, as he looked Joe up and down. Yet I thought the sneer was merely a habitual fling at anything different from his own untidy penury. He went on: "Want a job?"

"I might want a better job," replied Joe, without a gleam of mischief. "A fellow always wants that."

"My business is increasing on me," the shyster

explained, cautiously feeling his man. "I need a clerk again. I could pay you better than before."

"Twice as well?" asked Joe.

Stidger calculated. Since he had previously paid Joe next to nothing, he could very well afford to double it. "If you've learned something in the meantime," he stipulated.

"Will you pay in advance?" inquired Joe, still entirely mild.

"Me? In advance?" Stidger was outraged.

"Then I'm very sorry," answered Joe, and turned to untie Peter.

Now Peter was a strikingly unhandsome beast, of a roan color, with a nearly roan mane which contrasted unfavorably, and nobly raw-boned. Even Stidger, unaccustomed as he was to observing horses, from his spite to me had come to know the beast. Recognizing him, he cast his suspicious glance around and saw me standing smiling on the steps.

"He'll pay you, Joe," said I, "in promissory notes, payable when, if, and as collectible."

If the man Stidger caused me, Heaven knows, enough trouble before he passed out of my life, he gave me some moments of pleasure. I joyed, just now, to see him grow pale and red, and snarl, and bite his lip. Thus mutely furious he passed along, and out of self-respect I did not laugh at him.

"It's not good form," said Joe reproachfully, "to guy the opposing counsel."

I answered: "I must have a little fun out of this, if I can."

"He'll tell your cousin," Joe replied.

I suppose he did. But often as I tried to imagine the intercourse of Stidger with Cousin Lon, I never could make it seem human. I always imagined the father of evil, whispering his instigations into the ear of a tortured spirit—for that Cousin Lon was happy or even satisfied I never could believe, nor could any one who saw his great haggard eyes. And so I often told myself that I had the best of it.

In such a mood I still enjoyed my life and its duties. The opal morning, the handling of the scented hay, the meditative task of milking, all made my early chores seem light. The companionship of horses, next, had become a solace; they knew me and responded to my care, and I knew that from them I should never receive treachery or malice. And then the steady drive of work out in the open fields purged through my pores all discontent. Appetite, too, was a great dependence. To eat my snack in the cooling breeze, or at home to sit down to a spotless service, with food attractive and plentiful and hot, as mother said was hygienically right, and as I knew was spiritually easeful and conducive to slow eating, and to thankfulness—this was no mean pleasure. And then at night to sit on the door-step in the fading light, talking with mother of work done and plans for the morrow, feeling the languor of content and the creeping

desire for repose—this was a fit end for any man's day.

But it was not complete. There was an unfilled gap. For a week after the notice of the suit I wondered why I should feel a strange vacancy. At last one evening, before I felt willing to go to bed, my feet took me in the last dusk, in which appeared the early moon, along the path to the other farm. I meant to go to the wall and look across it and come home.

But leaning on the wall appeared a quiet figure. And at my sudden feeling of relief I understood myself, and said: "Of course!"

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Margery lifted her friendly eyes. "Binney, I was lonesome!"

"And so was I," I admitted. "Why didn't you come and see mother?"

"I wanted one of you to come to see me first."

We talked for twenty minutes before she said that she must go. But it was settled that, since mother and I could no longer go to her house, Margery should run over and visit us when she could. And so my restlessness was appeased.

Her visits made my days the pleasanter. Especially was I glad that in haying time, which now was coming on, I could enjoy her comforting presence. For now my work doubled, and mother took the milking and the light chores, in order that I should get in the greatest crop that, thanks to our heavy fertilizing, our farm had yet yielded. As

I look back, I wonder how I had the courage to try it alone, or the strength to handle it. The cutting was comparatively easy. Once around each field with the scythe, for the headlands, and the rest with the machine, was no especial task. The tedder carried me well through the next stage of the work. The raking also was not bad, for the horses took the burden of it. But the cocking and spreading, repeated because of showers, and finally the work of getting in the hay, were very laborious. Much as the patent loader saved me, on our uneven fields it had to be followed by hand. A boy to help me, for the driving only, would have saved me much time in the field; a man would have made the loading light. But sometimes, when using the loader on a fresh field, and always in haste because of the fear of showers, I risked too heavy a load home, and all but upset; and sometimes, rather than climb too much on a soft load, when loading by hand I had to be content to put on all that I could toss from the ground, and so travelled light to the barn. There the work was very burdensome. The hay-fork worked pretty well, no doubt; but its crankiness was very much for me to manage. In the muggy air of the fields or in the close barn the work was very heavy. At night I was dog-tired.

Without encouragement from mother, and especially from Margery, I doubt if I could have done the work. From dusk to dusk it was a race against time. Nothing refreshed me so much as to brag a bit. After each load mother slipped out to see how

the mows had grown, and once each day Margery came to look and exclaim, and listen to my vain-glory. They sent me to the field heartened for another spurt; their encouragement was better than wine. And when one afternoon the last load was safely off the field and the mows were filled to the rafters, and I, the pygmy that had built these precipices of hay, stood looking at them from below, it seemed as if I could not wait for mother's and Margery's approval.

Now, when I had unharnessed the horses and watered them, and again stood gloating, I heard a light step behind me: Margery's footfall. And then her voice.

"Well done, Binney!"

I turned to her eagerly. "What do you think of it?"

"Father's crop is light," she said. "We couldn't fertilize as you did. But even he has only just finished; and here have you, in the same time, got into the barn the biggest lot of hay that ever I saw here."

"Is it?" I cried, delighted. "I wondered if I could believe it. Margery, come and tell mother."

We were passing out of the barn, and I was very voluble, and her eyes were shining up into mine, when suddenly she started and intently listened. Up the stony farm road came the clatter which last summer meant but one thing. Our eyes sought one another. Gertrude? And Margery drew away from me.

Could it be Gertrude? She had not answered my letter of farewell, and what lies her father had told her about me I could only guess. Why should she come now, or why at all? Yet such thoughts were soon smothered by the feeling of anticipation. I saw through the orchard-trees the flicker of bright head-gear, some one in red was dashing around the curve, some one in gray was following, and—yes, Gertrude came headlong into our yard, with all her old-time recklessness.

Behind her was Collester, more reticent, more sane.

Gertrude was in her impetuous mood. Her flushed cheeks and flashing eyes were quite in keeping with that flaming hat of hers. She stopped her panting horse, and from her pretty mouth, as she gazed at the house, she sent a clear, resonant cry:

“Yoho! Binney!”

In a moment I was close to her. “Here, Gertrude.” Instantly turning, she looked down at me.

Always magnetic, always vital. But now I saw in Gertrude’s face some change that was not clear to me. Whim may have had its share in prompting the visit, but something besides had determined her, as I knew when I saw question looking out of her eyes at me. I had never seen her so high-bred and self-possessed, quite so near to grand-ladyship. Without a word, she stretched to me her ungloved hand, her left, and held mine firmly as I gave it. And so she looked me through.

I was puzzled, for she was asking something that I did not understand. Gertrude was always too deep and too swift for me. All I could do was to remain silent before her questioning, until her eyes should release me.

In a second, two seconds—I cannot tell how long, but I knew she had ended an examination of me—her serious glance flickered to a laugh, and she said:

“Binney, how you are changed!”

“Changed?” I echoed blankly.

“Years older in these few months,” she said. “And broader, Binney, and very much harder in muscle. And your hand is rough and calloused.”

I withdrew it hastily, for I was not quite sure of her laugh and thought her disappointed in me. Her telling me that I was changed was not now a challenge to flirting; she had weighed me in her balances, and I wondered if I had failed of her standard. I stammered some excuse.

For there came over me, as never since our first acquaintance, the difference between us. I was no longer the farmer’s boy, with the world before him. I was the farmer himself, sweat-marked and toil-stained, tied to the farm. If this was what Gertrude saw in me, if her laugh meant disdain, there was every reason for it.

From me she turned to Margery, who was slowly coming forward. “And Margery, too! Oh, Binney, take me down!”

I swung her from the saddle and set her on her

feet, and the two met. I never could be quite sure of Gertrude's manner toward other girls. Sometimes I have thought she underprized them, and especially Margery, not appreciating those qualities in which they differed from her, but knowing well their lesser brilliancy. This struck me now when I heard her greeting: "You dear child!" But I turned very eagerly to Colleston, having Gertrude's bridle in my left hand, but the right free for this good friend.

His solid self-possession had never struck me quite so strongly. He had the air of a spectator, kindly but detached. But when I said, "I am glad you could get free of business," he smiled and shook his head.

"This is business," he said. "When Gertrude heard where I was going, and why, she took her chaperon and started ahead of me. She was at the hotel when I arrived. Apparently you had not told her of the lawsuit."

"I saw no need," I answered. "It seemed a little like reproaching her."

There was a little gleam in Colleston's eye that showed that I had given him evidence as to her share in the destruction of the old will. "She wormed my knowledge out of me," he said. "She always does. And she declared that she was involved, and must see you."

"Yes," said Gertrude, who now had Margery by the waist. "And you must let me talk business with you—very serious business."

We tied the horses. Then mother came out, and we settled on the door-step; Gertrude kept Margery, and would not let her slip away. And when we were all seated she said her say.

"Father is so queer," she said, looking at me sidewise, as if defying me to put the statement differently. "He declares that he has no recollection of the terms of that old will, so that it will do no good for him to testify." I glanced at Colleston; he lifted his brows, and I wondered what the wily broker really meant to do. Gertrude was quite aware of this interchange of glances, and went on with lifted chin. "And he has been very sulky about refusing to help. But I remember quite clearly what he told me of the will, riding home that day. And so, Binney, I can testify in your favor."

She finished with a pretty air of triumph, then played with one of Margery's hands. As for me, I wondered if she really did not know that second-handed evidence was of very little value. I glanced again at Colleston, who pursed his lips and shook his head. I wondered if he, too, questioned whether Gertrude was as simple as she appeared.

"That will depend on my lawyer," I answered.

She pouted. "That means you don't think much of my offer."

Colleston explained: "If it comes to hearsay evidence, and your father declares himself uncertain of what he read, I am afraid that your statement will not help us."

"Indeed!" returned Gertrude, with a very charming toss of the head. "And have you properly considered how I can influence the jury?"

"But," explained Collester, "this being purely a question of law, the case will not go before a jury."

"And won't I influence the judge, then?" cried Gertrude. "But I have no patience with either of you." She rose. "I must go back to supper."

And to my surprise she left the subject that she had travelled so far to see me about. She kissed Margery, and said good night to mother, and ordered me to fetch her horse.

When I had raised her to her saddle she leaned down to me. Collester was speaking with mother and Margery; we two were quite by ourselves. "That was well done," said Gertrude swiftly. "Do you know that you are twice as strong as ever?"

Personalities. "I need to be," I answered. "I work twice as hard."

"When will you ride with me?" she demanded. "To-morrow morning?"

At once I was eager. "But Joe is away with Peter overnight," I remembered. "And I suppose Mr. Collester wants me for some business."

"And there is all the farm work," she mocked. "Well, go about your regular work. But you shall not escape me."

And she was off, quite as abruptly as she had come. Collester hurried after.

"Upon my word," I said as I watched them go.

"Gertrude does beat me. She seemed to have an idea in her head, but she dropped it very readily. What did she really have in mind?"

Mother and Margery glanced at each other with meaning. But I could not get a word out of them.

CHAPTER XXVII

MOTHER claims she knew at once that Gertrude's coming excited me—stirred me up, as she expressed it. Well, she was right, but she knew it quicker than I did myself. It was not until I lay tossing on my bed, and wondering at the slow coming of sleep, that I realized that Gertrude's bright glances were in my mind, her ringing tones were in my ears. I was anticipating the morning's meeting; but worse, I was discontented with myself. That was the usual effect of Gertrude in her challenging mood—an unsettling, a restlessness. Not that she stirred up ambition, but rather vague resolves to please her.

I had intended to put a day on cultivating the corn, which I had necessarily slighted during haying time, and which badly needed attention. For the weeds were too high, and the corn was growing so fast that I must cultivate now or never. A little unwillingly I made ready for the work; and thinking that perhaps she might come to find me, I discarded my overalls, wore my second-best trousers, and confined my brown throat in a collar and necktie. And I took pains that mother should know where I expected to spend the morning. I took the horses' feed with me, intending to leave them

to eat in the field, while I slipped home across lots for my dinner.

In good time I had the two-horse cultivator going up and down the long rows. And fine rows they were. This was an important enterprise, this field of fodder corn, for I had chosen a variety different from what father always used, and in every way had treated it differently, whether in distances, the number of plants to the hill, or the absence of "hilling up." And I certainly now felt joy in seeing it coming nobly on, the broad leaves waving, and the stalks shooting ever taller. They were up to my elbows as I sat on the cultivator; in another week they would be above my shoulders, and no machine could go between them. There was promise of a field of twelve-foot corn, a full silo, and fine milk and cream for the winter.

And yet my eye kept roving, and my mind wandered from the work. Would Gertrude perhaps follow me to the field?

Noon was approaching, the field was more than half done, and something within me was mentioning dinner, while another organ was troubled with the beginning of disappointment, when over the tops of the nodding corn I saw a bright spot of color. It seemed to have perched itself at a side of the field to which in a few moments I must approach. And I smiled. That daring vermilion I had yesterday seen surmounting Gertrude's frizz—and I was glad to feel that, since the day was not hot, I was still pretty tidy.

I reached her at the end of the next row. She was very comfortably seated on the shady wall, and beside her was the bright tin dinner-pail which she had fetched.

Now Gertrude was so made that while she loved to adapt herself to those about her, and did it charmingly, she always gave the impression that it was a bit of a masquerade. It was as if a princess came into your sphere for a while for the fun of it. I had forgotten all this in the months in the city, when it was I, doubtless, who was masquerading. But here she was, rather too dainty for the rugged wall, begloved and very prettily shod, yet willingly risking her adornments for the sake of this new experience.

"I asked your mother for the lunch," she said, beginning to pull off her gloves. "She directed me here. Hurry, Binney! Come and eat."

"The horses first," I answered.

"Oh, the horses first!" she echoed, with a little mouth at me. "We must be humane, of course."

I fed the horses, then took my place beside her on the wall. "See," said Gertrude, opening the pail. "I took your mother rather by surprise, I fear. But here is cake, and pie, and some cookies; I put them up myself. She said there was water here near by, so I left the coffee, for fear of slopping it. And I left a kind of thick soup, which would be horrid if I spilled it on my dress. And I meant to bring meat and cheese, but there was no room."

The fixings and not the solids! I was to work

all the afternoon on cake and pie and cookies! But Gertrude had her pretty mouth open to begin on a slice of Washington pie, which mother could make quite as well as Margery. "Come!" she cried, "I'm famished, Binney!"

On the frivolities (for mother's cake is light) I contrived to make myself feel as if I had eaten. And water is always refreshing.

"What a lovely field," said Gertrude. "And what is it going to be?"

But when I explained that the corn was to become silage, and what silage was, she shuddered and would hear no more. "Animals must be fed, I suppose. But they feed so greedily!"

Gertrude had early wiped her lips with the filmiest handkerchief, her hunger already appeased. She was always dainty, but now I reasoned that her slender appetite explained her preference for the sort of food she brought me. And picking and choosing is very graceful when the jewelled hand hovers over the dish, or even over the dinner-pail.

"I hate to think," she went on, "that you're making it your business to feed animals. And you are, aren't you?"

"Why, yes, after a fashion," I admitted. "But only in order to feed myself."

"But with your investments," she went on (and I saw that she was still ignorant of her father's robbing me), "you could hire men to do the dirty work, and yourself be boss. I hate to have you just a laborer." And she pouted.

Except for a purpose, Gertrude never pouted. Her mind was above it. But she was willing to appear very young if only she could persuade. This time I smiled at the artifice.

"It is what I was brought up to, Gertrude. And you know we never have workmen on our farm."

"Oh, your everlasting boxes!" she rejoined. "They will never be found. I don't believe that they exist."

We sparred for a time, then drifted into reminiscences; yet I knew that we should get back to the point, for I felt sure that a point there was. And the reminiscences! Could I but reproduce them, I should make more clear the charm which Gertrude laid upon me. She spoke of dances and of teas, the opera and theatre, of the friends that we met at all these places. She made them rise and move before me. And as I saw myself in these familiar scenes, careless and very gay, I was delighted until something recalled to me the fact that, after all, I was but a farmer, with a farmer's drudgery binding him down.

Perhaps Gertrude saw this; perhaps she worked for it, and knew the word that had recalled me to myself. At any rate, it was when I had fallen into sudden dejection that she laid her hand upon my arm. "Pleasant times, weren't they, Binney? And there was one time that almost promised to be—something more than pleasant."

With a suddenly jumping heart, I looked at her. Was she to acknowledge, so late, the meaning of

the evening that had so thrilled me? Did she think of me, as I of her, as the one who had brought nearest the meaning of life? She met my eye boldly.

"Must the farm be run?" she plainly asked. "Can't you come back to the city again?"

"And leave mother?" I asked.

"Bring her," she returned.

Even then, with life drawing near again, I had to try to be practical. "The farm would be spoiled," I said. "It would be overrun with treasure-seekers. Men would run excursions up from Athol and over from Barre. I couldn't leave the property to be ruined."

Gertrude's manner changed instantly: I had given her her opening. "And yet," she said with suddenly intense earnestness, "you left behind in Boston a better property to go to ruin."

I looked at her. What could she mean? With serious eyes she nodded at me slowly.

"Your name," she explained. "Your reputation as a worker and a fighter. You who came to conquer the city have left it at the first defeat."

Her glance burned shame into me. My eyes turned away.

"People want to know," said Gertrude with deadly calm, "when Mr. Hartwell is to settle his affairs and come back. They know you've had a quarrel with father. How long can I conceal from them that you're a—" She paused, then drove the word at me—"a quitter?"

I had not thought of this. It dismayed me. In the pause I looked up. Her keen face was firmly set, her eyes were burning bright. They fixed mine; I could not look away. Suddenly, in the midst of my foolish peace, this summons had come to me.

"As for this farm," she began again, her voice beginning to thrill, "let it be ruined! There may be sixty thousand dollars hidden here in those last two boxes. And you may not find either of them in all the rest of your life. But in father's office, or in Mr. Colleston's, you can earn that sum twice over in a few years!"

Now this was fiery; it made the farm seem mean, my peaceable retreat mere hiding. It roused me to the hope of redeeming myself. Seeing, I suppose, the flash in my eyes, Gertrude hurried on.

"What is there if you stay? You drudge along. Perhaps you marry Margery."

Marry Margery! I had never thought of it. Studying me, Gertrude laughed low. "Why Binney, how little you have looked ahead! Now listen to what I have thought for you. Pay no attention to this lawsuit. Even if you lose it, you have only to hand over the money. Put on the farm the most honest manager you can find, and trust the rest to yourself."

"There is a man," I said, beginning to take fire, "very dull but very honest, whom I could put here."

She clutched me, her little hand, very pink and shapely, seizing my great tanned wrist. "Come and explain it to your mother!"

But the mention of mother showed me a difficulty. For me she would do anything, for Gertrude next to nothing. I hesitated, and Gertrude shook me with impatience.

"You are so slow!"

"Because once I was too quick," I responded. "Let us manage mother carefully, and our luck will be the better."

Our luck! The pronoun slipped out and could not be recalled. But her eye still looked steadily into mine; and though she released my arm, it was not in displeasure. As for me, where was I going?

Looking back, I had recently wondered why I had not fallen in love with Gertrude. But if an instinctive recognition of her artifices kept me from it, as I sometimes thought, now all these subterfuges were for me. For me she had come from Boston, had planned this appeal, had sought the right moment for it. I knew now why she had yesterday studied me so carefully. And through her I should be able to hold up my head again.

I caught her hand. "Gertrude, but for you I should grub along here forever. How can I thank you?"

She left her hand in mine. I had never held it so before, a warm, responsive thing that returned my clasp. Yet very coolly she replied:

"Thank me by showing what you can do."

Her self-possession provoked a desire to move her in her turn. I held her hand the tighter, en-

folding it till I felt the hard gems in her rings. "Tell me why you are helping me so!"

Her hand relaxed, grew limp, drew away. And she smiled at my eagerness. "To make little boys ask questions."

But she was not rebuking me. And we were alone there in the hollow, with no one to see but the crows overhead and the squirrels in the wood. Her smile was a provocation, her pursed lips a challenge. Something surged within me, and before I realized the temptation I had snatched her to me. Her breast to mine, her clear eyes looking up.

But because her eyes were so clear and unmoved, and because, without other resistance, her little hand was laid on my shoulder warningly, the flood within me subsided as quickly as it came, and left me hollow and shaking. Never before had I held a girl or a woman so; every nerve was unstrung by the new emotion. Releasing her, I rose and turned away; I moistened my lips, but was silent. How could I excuse myself?

"Sit down again, Binney," she said in her crystal voice. "There are just a few words that I want to say." And when I was seated, though unable to look at her, she went on: "Father is cross with you. But you're much better off in Mr. Collester's office."

Now that I had held her so, even for so short an instant, how could I take Collester's help, believing that he loved her? How could she propose it?

"There must be other offices," I said. "I'd like to stand entirely on my own feet."

"You would make a mistake," she replied very positively. "Now, Binney, leave it all to me. Remember that last time you had your own way, and bungled."

She took away my belief in myself, and I could not answer. "Remember!" she said, beginning to rise. I rose also. She swung herself down on the opposite side of the wall, and across it I tried to look at her. Difficult as it was, on account of my still strong quivering, I grew calm enough to see that she was still entirely cool. She leaned toward me.

"I'm glad it's settled," she said winningly. "And, Binney, one last thing. Lean across. I want to whisper."

I leaned to her, and turned to her an ear. I was quite unexpectant. But one hand came up and touched my cheek, her soft lips brushed the other. Gertrude had kissed me! And then as I looked at her, struggling with my surprise, doubtful of her meaning, she nodded saucily, waved me good-by, and tripped away. Had she run I would have followed her. But she was so entirely mistress of herself that I remained where I was.

Through the maze of my ideas when, in order to lessen their confusion, I at last turned to my work, gradually two came clearest. First, I was to give up this life in order to start fresh in the city. Secondly, there was an understanding between

Gertrude and me, of a nature defined by the fact that I might not kiss her, while she might, if she chose, kiss me. This implied (and somehow it was very clear in my head) that she was not bound to me unless she chose to be satisfied with me, but that meanwhile I was quite at her service.

The strange tingling in my cheek, where a butterfly still seemed to hover, kept through the afternoon the memory of Gertrude's kiss. With it often returned the thrill of that impulse to seize upon her. Her face, with its brilliant eyes and smile, frequently was before my eyes. Her daintiness, her insight, her masterfulness, her poise, the position which she could gain by their means, and the adornment which she could bring to it—these were constantly in my mind, always followed by the thought that perhaps she would condescend and that they would be mine. How she had condescended to-day!

Yet deeper still lay question. In spite of my youthful reverence for the girl, excusing her vagaries and loyally abiding by the step to which I had tempted her, I felt a doubt. Had Gertrude and I gone too far on ground too weak to hold us? Of flirting I knew nothing whatever. It never occurred to me that I could draw back. I started homeward with a clouded mind.

Then when I thought of mother I felt a deeper trouble. How was I to explain all this to her?

Said mother at supper: "You don't talk very much to-night, Binney, but you eat a good deal."

Now I had mechanically been filling a great emptiness, and I had to laugh. "I guess you know why."

"She wouldn't make a good provider," remarked mother, with that approach to grimness which I had before seen in her when she spoke of Gertrude. I felt that my doubts were deepening.

A little later I tried mother once more. We sat on the porch in the dusk, and the evening was beautiful. Mother spoke of the gold in the sunset. "Yes," I agreed. "But, mother, the real gold is in the city."

Mother was obstinately silent.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A QUITTER? The word haunted my uneasy sleep. It spoiled my waking. Whichever way I turned, was I not a quitter—a traitor to the old life, or a traitor to the new?

Before I went further with mother, I wanted to talk with Colleston. He had spent his first day with Joe, and was likely to spend another, so I went out to my work. The morning changed from cool to sultry, so that the horses were all of a lather, and I dripped until great clouds began to pass slowly overhead, cutting off the sun. Then a storm broke over Philipston, blotting out the town; and that was a rare thing in the morning. I watched to see if it would back up against us, which often means hail and a bad storm. But it marched southward along the ridge, within three miles of us, and so passed away toward Williamsville. To the west, when the sky cleared again, the sky was a wonderfully deep blue—too deep, I knew, for peace. So when I drove dinnerward I resolved to keep near the house in the afternoon, for the sake of mother and the cattle.

A patch of our millet was so tall that it was sure to be lodged by wind or rain, so I cut it down and got at least half under cover as green fodder for

the next two days. Then I climbed to the roof of the barn and replaced a few split shingles as precaution. Here I became absorbed by the landscape, and sat on the ridge-pole to study how the great floating clouds were casting wonderful shadows, while the distance was hazy. Greylock, which we see clearly in fair weather, was out of sight, lost in the shadow of a single cloud, miles broad at the slaty base, but climbing, mass on mass, to pure whiteness in the sunlight. From this would come our storm, if from anywhere.

I heard a voice hailing me, and there on the ground was Collester. Joking, I invited him up; nevertheless, up he came, nobly disdaining clothes and neatly managing the two ladders. We sat on either side of the ridge-pole, facing the west, with our discussion entirely safe from eavesdroppers.

We spoke for a while of Cousin Lon's suit, and he praised Joe's work. "In general," he summed up, "the outlook is promising. The real difficulty lies in the fact that the one apparently disinterested witness who read the old copy before it was destroyed may testify against you."

"Mr. Worthen keeps his grudge?" I asked. "He is ungrateful, for I might have brought suit against him."

"He hates you," said Collester. "Nobody ever treated him as you did. In the one talk which I have had with him he swore viciously when I mentioned your name. The question is whether he can afford to keep his grudge. At the best he

is in a fair way of losing a good deal. If a certain suit is brought he is likely to be bankrupt. And he has the idea that I can save him from the worst results."

Gertrude's influence I would not mention, but I thought I saw another hope. "He surely can't expect you to help him unless he helps you against Stidger."

Colleston nodded, but kept his eyes on the landscape. Not fathoming what might further be in his mind, I waited. But I felt very cheerful, as if my suit were as good as won with the help of Mr. Worthen.

And now a rattling of wheels came from behind us. Turning, I saw a buggy drive into the yard. In it sat the man himself.

His clothes betrayed the state of his mind. Mr. Worthen usually dressed for the occasion. In the country he sported his tweeds; while travelling he was neat in pepper-and-salt; in his office he mostly wore, with proper dignity, his frock coat. But it was the latter which he wore now, and his silk hat was a little tilted over one eye from the rough jolting of our road. From under its brim, as he tried to straighten it, he peered up at us.

Behind him, very carefully choosing footing on the grassy edge of the road, came Gertrude quietly on her horse, looking very demure. That her father knew she was following I gathered from a hitch of his shoulder as he half turned to glance back. Then impatiently he controlled himself and

resumed his scrutiny of us. Gertrude stopped at a little distance and cheerfully smiled upward.

Mr. Worthen, at first unable to believe, I suppose, that there was Collester calmly seated on the ridge-pole of a barn, called up doubtfully: "Collester, is that you?"

"Yes."

"Then come along down. I must speak with you."

"Presently," answered Collester. And he turned very composedly to me again.

"His coming proves that that suit has been entered against him. Now I have him where I don't want him, ready to do anything for me."

"You don't want him so?" I asked, surprised.

"Hartwell," he answered, "this is important to you, so come and listen." And he started to climb down.

"Let me go first," I said. "Going down is different from coming up."

It certainly is. To change from one ladder to another is easy when going up, for the eye can see and the hand can grip. But to look down over the eaves of a high barn, and to feel with the toe of a slippery boot for the upper rung of a ladder that is just a little too far below, needs practice. When I looked up from the lower ladder and saw Collester peering for his foothold, for the first time I perceived in his eyes hesitation and doubt. Then I told him to slip over to me, and he did it with perfect confidence. A man is in no very graceful

position when his lower half dangles into space; but the gable concealed us from those in the yard, and I quickly placed his feet on the ladder. Speedily we were on the ground.

I followed behind Collester as he approached Mr. Worthen. The banker-broker had left his buggy, and was awaiting us at the wall, out of ear-shot of his driver. Yet the latter never would have heard us had we talked at his side, so absorbed was he in examining every cranny in sight for a glimpse of a leaden box. It was the way with all of them.

My old employer scowled at me, disdaining recognition. "Collester," he said impatiently, "I want to talk with you alone."

Gertrude's horse whickered as she moved him closer. She sat within a couple of yards of us, and again Mr. Worthen hitched his shoulder, but controlled himself from looking round. I had to smother a smile, but Collester answered with perfect gravity:

"I thought, as Mr. Hartwell was in a way concerned in anything we might say, he ought to be present."

Mr. Worthen sullenly glowered, while I, sensing deep changes in him, tried to analyze them. His clothes were wrinkled from his journey; his hat had been rubbed counter to its gloss, streaked in roughened lines; and on his face were the cinders of the train. But the deepest change was in his fidgety manner. As he stood he shifted on his feet; his once hearty and confident glance was restless

and uneasy; and he repeatedly moistened his lips. He looked again at me, and I half expected a roar such as he often, in old times, let out at an offending clerk. But he turned to Colleston and hesitated.

"I suppose," Colleston pursued, "that the Clark people have at last taken steps against you."

"They have, the treacherous brutes," snapped Mr. Worthen, glad to turn his resentment against some one. "I have kept them on their feet for years, and this is how they treat me!"

Colleston made no comment. "And what shall you do?"

"I came here about it," answered Mr. Worthen. "Your office sent me to Petersham. The hotel people directed me here. And," he added pettishly, "Gertrude saw me and had to up and follow."

Behind him Gertrude nodded her head. "I had to." Softly.

"And what do you want of me?" asked Colleston.

The cold inquiry brought an abrupt pause between them. Mr. Worthen's face expressed the small boy's dismay when, at the end of a long and panting chase of the baker's cart, he fears he has lost his dime. The overwhelming reason which was to bring Colleston to his side, in the face of this indifference seemed suddenly weak. But he collected himself and answered:

"You've got to take my case." His manner made this less of a demand than a suggestion.

"Well," asked Collester, "and if I do?" As if the baker were saying: "Your dime, little boy, supposing you find it, will scarcely purchase this magnificent pie."

Mr. Worthen's little eyes glared for a moment at me. Then he hitched backward a resentful shoulder. Finally he jerked out an answer:

"I will testify for you in this Hartwell suit."

For a moment my spirit sang within me. Stidger was downed! The farm was safe! Warm satisfaction flowed through me.

I cannot excuse this. It is natural, of course, to be very quick in perceiving one's own advantage. And when I saw Gertrude's sparkling eyes, and her bright nod of congratulation at this assurance of success, I almost tossed my hat.

All I can say in my own defense is that I recovered myself quickly. I needed no reproachful glances from Collester, but only, I thank God, my own reflection.

For the bald terms! Bribed, Worthen would tell the truth. And the bribe? That Collester would save him from punishment. I thought of poor Canby. I thought of my father in his grave. I thought, too, of Collester's honorable standing in his profession. And then, shamed, I looked at Collester's face.

Hopefully—yes, truly I can say that hopefully he was looking at me. As our eyes met, our hands, of their own accord, came forward and gripped. And then I understood his kindness to me and, too,

in part repaid him for it. He liked me, he believed in me, and now he found me worth his liking and belief. The clasp of our hands expressed it all.

There came to me such a change of spirit—joy at this new understanding, resentment at the trap that was baited for us—that I turned to break out upon Mr. Worthen. But recollecting myself, I looked at Colleston again. He smiled.

"Say it," he said. "He will understand you quicker than me." And so I stepped closer to my old employer.

If I had not seen, behind him, Gertrude closely watching, I might have said all that was in my mind. But I remembered that she did not yet understand his treachery to me, and (for her sake, not for his) I tried not to tell her.

"Go and get another lawyer," I told him. "Mr. Colleston will not help you."

I heard Gertrude's "Oh!" of surprise. Worthen knew at once that I told him the truth, and his red face grew pale. But he tried to bluster through. "What have you to do with it?" he demanded.

"Everything," I answered. "If the price of his working for you is to be your help in my suit, then I don't want your help."

"You fool!" he cried. "You are throwing your case away. The side I testify for will win."

"You flatter yourself," I retorted.

He stood glaring. Behind him Gertrude urged her horse a pace nearer, and knowing her about to speak, I hurried on:

"Mr. Collester is the only reputable lawyer that you could hope to secure. Yet you couldn't approach him but for personal acquaintance. Try another sort of man. Try Stidger!"

"Binney!" appealed Gertrude.

"There is nothing else to be said," I answered, but would not look at her.

Indeed, Mr. Worthen was a more interesting sight than even Gertrude at that minute could be. His whole face grew as purple as his nose, his very eyes seemed red, and his strong teeth showed. A fine, stirring picture of an angry brute.

But he choked on his own fury. Inarticulate words rasped his throat, and he was seized by a fit of coughing. I even sympathized with his exasperation as, trying to still the convulsion, he grew almost blue, while his glare faded in spite of his effort to fix it on me. The sweat was on his forehead before he had mastered himself. And seeing him stand before me breathless and shaking, I took him by the arm and led him to the buggy.

"Better leave the matter as it stands," I told him. "Nothing can be gained by further talk." I helped him into his seat, backed the carriage about, and supposed that we had peaceably got rid of him.

But as the driver was about to start his horse, Mr. Worthen seized the reins. With recovered voice he roared at Collester:

"Do you stand by what he says?"

"Yes," answered Collester quietly.

"Painted dummy!" shouted Mr. Worthen. "Tailor's model! Cold Boston fish-ball!"

He yanked at the horse's mouth till the beast began to back; but, quite unconscious of it, he turned his attention to me.

"But I've got you!" he jeered. "Where's the money that you and your silly father left with me? It would help you out of this scrape. But it's gone, by heck! And don't you need it now? I guess not!"

The wheels were cramped now, and the buggy began to tip as the horse still backed. The driver snatched the reins and used the whip. But still the horse backed, and still Mr. Worthen was unconscious of it.

"A fine figure of a fool you were in my office. And mighty cocky now, you cooked goose. I'll show you! I'll own this farm that you're so proud of. My summer residence, you idiot! You——!"

As he was proceeding in true washerwoman style, the driver in vain still lashing with his whip, the heavy cant of the carriage at last brought Mr. Worthen to himself. He clutched at the side of the seat as his rolling eyes measured his danger. Another moment, and the buggy would have been over. But a hand on the bridle checked the excited horse, and I led him again into the middle of the barnyard. I headed him straight and slapped his haunch and let him go. The carriage whirled by me with Mr. Worthen clutching the seat with one hand, his hat with the other. The buggy-top

eclipsed him, the clatter drowned anything he might say. And so he made his exit.

I wanted to laugh, but all was not yet over, for Gertrude was still there. Apprehensively I looked at her.

She was magnificently disgusted. "And you will lose this chance to win?" she demanded of me. "Binney, what are you thinking of?"

"Under the circumstances," I answered, very vaguely, as I knew, "there was nothing else to be done."

Gertrude showed that she understood me only too clearly. "But men have to put up with things. It's the only way to get ahead. It's what women do. You can't be free from it."

"I wasn't thinking of myself only," I mumbled, scarcely able to face her, though I knew myself right.

Gertrude's disapproval included Colleston. "It wouldn't have hurt him to take father's suit!" she cried. "I see that father cheated you. But here was a chance to set him on his feet again, and save your farm, and probably get your money back. Why, it would have helped any lawyer's reputation to do a thing so neatly."

It pained me to know that Colleston must have heard, even though he was walking away. Indeed, it pained me to hear. For this was Gertrude's outlook on life!

"How can you win your suit?" she demanded.

"I will win it, or I will lose it," I answered, "on

the facts of the case as everybody knows them." But I knew that as I spoke my manner was sullen, as if she had put me in the wrong.

She merely sat her horse like a scornful statue, and looked at me.

"Gertrude," I pleaded, "we look at things differently."

"Indeed we do," she responded. "As for the suit, let it go. We agreed that it was of no consequence. But the future. How are you ever to succeed in the city if you set yourself up for a little George Washington?"

Her clear voice rang in the yard. Collester must have heard.

"Gertrude!" I pleaded again.

With a sudden, delightful smile, she leaned and put her hand upon my shoulder. "Let's not discuss it further now. But just remember how I think of it. I've thought so much on the subject, and I've heard a lot of idealistic talk, but it never brings success. Binney, you mustn't be soft. But we'll speak of this another time."

And with the friendliest of light farewells, as if now the important matter were to soothe me, she gathered up her reins and darted toward the gate. I heard her cast a jolly good-by to Collester as he plodded toward his horse. Then she was gone.

Plodding was the word for Collester. His heavy shoulders seemed to carry a load. I could not let him go without another word, and so I caught him before he mounted. As he heard me behind him

he turned; but when we stood facing I realized how little there was to say. For we both were thinking of Gertrude, yet neither of us could speak of her.

"So it's settled," I said clumsily.

"Settled," he answered. "And you are satisfied?"

As to my feeling about the suit, he knew it. I never stood up to a man with a kindlier feeling. All my little doubts of him, all my boyish resentments, had fallen away. We shook hands upon an understanding that could not have been made clearer by a day's discussion. And so I let him go.

But not happily. His head was bowed as he slowly rode away. And I knew that the ache in my heart as I thought of Gertrude was not so great as his.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE sun was still high when my visitors had left me, but during their short visit the atmosphere had changed. A glance at the west showed me that a storm was surely coming, and I thought of the cattle. If some of the young stock should be frightened and stray, it would be a great bother; therefore I started for the woods, on a short cut for the farther end of the pasture, intending to drive the cows before me to the lane. And as I like to do, I went a little way out of the shortest path, to take a drink at the spring.

They say that in spite of my bulk I walk very lightly. It comes, I suppose, from my squirrel and rabbit hunting as a boy. At any rate, I was within a couple of strides of the spring, and already saw the gleam of its waters through the bushes that surrounded it, when I roused some one on the other side of the leafy screen. I heard a little cry of alarm, but saw no start nor flight. And when I had rounded the bushes, there cowered little Bertie Stidger.

All eyes she seemed, with her body pressed within the covert, and held there by quivering repression. And the great eyes, under their cloud of hair, looked at me in pure fright.

"Why, you surely aren't afraid of me," I said. And sitting down on the stone where so many times I had rested, I followed the course which seemed to me best, and waited for her to come to me.

Thank Heaven for the instinct that teaches a child to trust its elders! In Bertie its long suppression made it stronger than homesickness. In just a moment, and even while her doubtful glance was studying my smile, her thin little legs were already in motion. She writhed herself out of the bush, and with delightful bashfulness came slipping toward me. When she sat beside me and fearlessly put her hand in mine, she looked up at me in perfect confidence.

"I wasn't going to take anything," she said.

"What could you take that you aren't welcome to?" I asked.

She answered innocently. "Father said if I looked I might find a little lead box."

"If you looked where?" I asked.

"Into holes, or hidden places. Under things. But there it's damp and slimy."

"Very much so," I agreed. "Bertie, you are very sensible."

"And if I found anything," she said with honest shrewdness, "the box wouldn't be father's, but yours."

"Of course," I agreed again.

"So I ought to give it to you, and not give it to father."

So little was I then interested in our boxes that

I thought it a perfectly fair chance to risk this child's finding them. "But," I said, "if you find it across the big double wall, you should give it to my cousin Margery."

The little girl's eyes shone up at me. "Oh, she is so good! Oh, yes, I will! To pay for the omelets and the cookies!"

"And are omelets," I asked, "as good as cookies?"

"Nicer!" she cried. "They smell so nice! They fill you so! And the bread, and the milk, and the butter! Why are milk and butter and eggs better in Petersham than in Athol?"

I might have said: "They needn't be," but I did not wish to betray the father to the child. "Because they are fresher," I answered. "And Bertie, I believe your cheeks are already redder and fatter because of it."

She nodded triumphantly. "Margery says so. And I sleep so sound!"

"Will you come some day and see me at my house?" I asked, for I liked the little cuddly thing, who now was within my arm. But she drew away and looked up in alarm.

"Oh, no!" she cried. "Father says there's a great dog there, and I must never go near him."

"You must be introduced to him," I said, "and then he will not even bark at you. And in just a minute—" I whistled. For the spring was not very far from the house, and Jones might have been straying on my trail.

Then I was sorry, for Bertie clutched me. "Oh,

will he come?" she cried. I nodded, for I heard his answering bark. "Oh, will he bite me?"

"Why, he is my dog," I answered. "Do you suppose he would bite my visitor?" And when the idea had taken her and she asked, "I am your visitor, ain't I?" then she sat upright and complacently smoothed her dress. I whistled again as a guide to Jones, and looked with pity on a child that was afraid of a dog. But I tried to prepare Bertie's mind.

"What are dogs in your street like?"

She shuddered. "Oh, dirty and lazy, and stealing at back doors, and always scratching themselves. And they lie in the middle of the road in the sun." From which I got a perfect picture of the street where Stidger resided.

"Jones," I explained, "can't get as dirty as a dog can get in town. And he isn't lazy, for he has his business and he attends to it." She looked up at me inquiringly. "Killing woodchucks," I told her, "and chasing rabbits, and guarding the place. But Bertie," I hastened to add, for I heard him coming, "though his big mouth is red and wet, and though he has a deep growl and noisy bark, he needs them in order to be a good policeman. But being a good policeman, he never yet has hurt anybody."

"I hear him!" cried Bertie, suddenly clinging to me tight.

Scrambling headlong through the brush, his excited whimper sounding before him, Jones hurled

himself into the open. With one arm I kept his feet from Bertie, while he fawned on me, pawed at me, and ventured on such familiarities as he dared.

"See," I said to Bertie, who cowered very close, "he doesn't pay any attention to you. But now I'll introduce you."

So I smote Jones lightly on the nose, to command attention, and made him lie down before me. But even then all he would do was to look at me, and pant, and slobber.

"Dogs have very bad manners," I said. "Now I will pay him no attention at all, but will tell you the story of 'Ali Baba,' and we shall see what the dog will do. Listen to me, but watch Jones."

She watched and listened, and I watched her. And Jones, seeing that I would not look at him, presently began to notice Bertie. Since she was with me, he accepted her as harmless, wagged at her and panted amiably. She shrank a little from the great red mouth, and looked up at me for an assurance of safety. My smile she echoed faintly, but again needed my encouragement when Jones began to sniff at her foot. Bravely she kept still, though in her little trembling frame I felt the effort. Jones wriggled nearer, but the child was stanch. And now he laid his big head in her lap and yearned up at her. With courage she put her white hand on him. Then he stood up, walked around behind her, and burrowed vigorously under her arm until he had forced his head through. Then, laying his head against her breast and languishing up at me,

he plainly said: "Since you will have none of me, this is next best."

And she, putting her thin little arm tightly around his neck, laughed aloud with pleasure.

The tale of "Ali Baba" came to an abrupt stop.

But while we were joking about Jones and petting him, and agreeing that he was the nicest dog in the world, he started and pricked his ears. "What is it?" asked Bertie.

"Some one is coming," I answered, for the low growl of warning was beginning in Jones's throat.

"Oh!" she cried, "do you suppose they think I'm lost?"

I heard Margery's call, and answered her. But to my disgust I saw, coming through the trees, not Margery alone but also Stidger. Bertie, who at the sight of Margery had begun to wave to her, dropped her hand on seeing her father. She shrank nearer to me.

Stidger, thrusting forward as he saw us, came in angry haste. "Bertie," he reproved, "don't you know there's a storm coming on? And," he demanded of me, "what you keeping my daughter here for?"

Jones growled, and Stidger stepped back. "Bertie," he commanded, "come away from that beast!"

Docilely though she went to his side, her great eyes looked back at Jones with regret.

"And you let that brute come near her!" Stidger complained.

"Very good company, wasn't he, Bertie?" I asked.

But in her father's presence she would not speak. Margery, who had joined them and stood silent, shook her head at me. Her little anxious frown begged me not to anger him.

Yet he needed very little provocation. "I'll trouble you," he said in his harsh and quarrelsome voice, in which already sounded the thrill of one of his outbursts of passion, "never to speak with that child again. And Bertie, you are to keep away from here. Understand?"

She answered "Yes," but I saw her look down sadly at the pool below her. The murmur of the overflow and the dancing of the sand in the spring meant much to the town child.

"Oh, come," I protested, "let the child have her pleasure. She may come here whenever she pleases, and I will let her alone."

But holding her tightly by the arm, he turned away. "Come now," he rasped out. "Come, Margery. It's lucky I was here with you both." And with clumsy show of protection, he laid his hand on Margery's shoulder.

She shrank away instantly, and the hand fell at his side; but I had seen the action. I saw too the stiff turning of her head away from me, and his sneering backward glance. Since he knew I could not resent his familiarity, perhaps he tried to rouse my burning desire to duck him in the spring. If so, he was successful. Not all the exasperations I

had provoked in him could equal my disgust and resentment at this single act of his. It was well that he did not stay. Marshalling the two before him, while they hurried with lowered heads, away went the triumphant male, leaving me to fume.

Was it fuming? It was rather a great and strange dismay. Until that scrubby rascal laid his hand on Margery's shoulder she had been to me merely a sister, my indifferent property, to help or to sympathize on demand. Stidger's outrageous familiarity, rousing my indignation, roused also my knowledge of what she really was. In the shadowy woods I saw the vision of a new Margery. Yet not newly discovered qualities, but rather the magnetic pull of a great new force, drew all my thought to her.

And a sneak-thief stretched out his vile hand for her, while only yesterday Gertrude gave me to understand that she reserved me for herself! Only yesterday, too, Gertrude had laughed at the dull prospect of my marrying Margery, and only to-day had I discovered the hopeless difference between Gertrude's ideals and mine.

Oh, fool! Oh, dull and slow! In nothing had I blundered worse! What could I do?

I stood there in a great amazement till the startling thunder roared fairly overhead. Then hurriedly, lest mother should worry about me, leaving the cattle to themselves I ran to the house.

CHAPTER XXX

THE darkness in the woods had come so gradually that I had not noticed it. When I reached the open, whimpering Jones keeping close by my side, I found that the storm had sent its advance-guard far ahead. In the swirling masses above me the lightnings were already playing, the thunder rumbling warningly. No rain had yet fallen, and waving my hand to mother, who stood on the porch anxiously watching for me, I ran to the pasture lane, where luckily all the cattle were waiting. Jones had rushed to the house, so he was not under my feet in my rapid manœuvres. I threw down the bars, and while the cattle were filing to the barn I swung the great doors to and propped them shut, then hastily put away all tools that were about. It was a lesson on the value of neatness. The cultivator, which I had left outside its shed, I had to drag in by hand. Some hand-tools, blankets long since dried in the sun, and the milk-cans, all had to be hurriedly put in their proper places. Then I secured each cow and heifer, shut the side door of the barn, chased the poultry under cover, closed every shed door, and was ready.

Sometimes a storm hangs strangely off. This one delayed. For a quarter of an hour I stood on

the porch with mother, studying the gloomy landscape, listening to the rumblings overhead, and wincing at the pale flashes before which no eyes could remain open.

"I don't see how you can like it," mother said at last. "I'm going in the house."

"But see the magnificence of it," I protested. "Look at the strange half-darkness. The double pine never looked finer than now, when it is the central point of all these sullen shadows."

But she would not stay, and left me there alone.

The storm did not live up to its promise. The big, surly clouds withheld their lightning; their advance was slow. The first drops fell wide and scattering, and even when the great sheets came the lack of thunder robbed them of dramatic interest. Nothing prepared me for what followed. I was sitting in the open doorway, protected by the roof of the little porch, and looking quite idly at the screen of rain, when there fell the single bolt which, before all was finished, meant so much to me.

It came in one broad sheet of light, against which I put up both hands. Behind me, in the kitchen, mother uttered a little scream. And while I was yet blinking, unable for the fire in my eyeballs to see anything clearly, the thunder seemed to split the very rocks, so did it crash and echo.

Mother gasped. "Is anything struck?"

"None of the buildings," I answered. "The noise came a couple of seconds after the flash, so

the lightning must have fallen perhaps a third of a mile away, in the woods."

No other flashes came. Slowly the storm passed. The last grumble of thunder, the last drop of rain, passed by. The final little wisp of cloud lifted from the woods, and left the view quite clear. For my part, I did not at first notice what had happened, since I was thinking of what was next to be done. I did not wish to begin milking until the cattle had quieted down. Only slowly did I sense an odd emptiness in the landscape.

Then mother came hurrying. "Binney, the double pine!"

It was gone! No wonder the landscape was empty. The giant dome of beautiful deep green, the central point of all our best views, had been swept away. Only a belt of woods remained, featureless and dull.

"It was the lightning," quavered mother. "Oh, Binney, the tree your father loved so! It must have been a fine young tree, he used to say, a hundred years ago."

I felt a great resentment at the loss. Of no value as timber, on account of the double and slightly curving trunks, the tree had been spared for generations. The taller it grew, the fonder and prouder of it we had felt. Twenty-five more years of life were its due; it might even have lasted out my days. And here a single lightning stroke had cut it down!

Gloomily I fetched my axe. "Mother," I said,

"I'll go down and look at it. If it lies across the cart track, I must cut it up to-morrow before I can get a wagon to the west meadow." And so, angry at my fortune, I went out.

The air, so fresh and cool after the rain, soothed me somewhat, and the dripping woods pleased me. It was a comfort to pass the spring and see its bower unchanged, too humble to be injured. Yet the depression of my loss remained with me; and when, emerging from the woods into the little glade where the double pine had stood, I saw its prostrate majesty, I had to choose between swearing and weeping. So I swore.

The two great boles had fallen straight apart and lay in the tangle of smaller trees which they had borne down before them. For some fifteen feet above the ground they had been united. This enormous trunk had now been cleft down the middle, and a cord of great shining yellow splinters had been hurled all about. Two score of fine young trees were ruined; a gap had been made in our pretty woods which would tell the tale for thirty years. And I felt as if the glory of our farm had departed.

Amid the strong odor of pine I made the effort to approach and plan to repair the damage. The smashed branches had been scattered everywhere; I had to pick my way among them. Poising the axe, I planned to mark out the morrow's work. The stubbed branches must be trimmed off, the great bole marked out in lengths. In this I found

a little relief. For as I forced myself into the mood for labor, I felt, as I always feel with an axe in my hand, like a man equipped for his job.

Some day will be written, I hope by a poet, the romance of the axe. No bitterer enemy, no kinder friend has man ever devised. Its warlike use has gone; to-day it is only the peaceful tool of farmer and pioneer. I love its balance and its grim face, its simplicity, its harsh, triumphant efficiency.

And so, as I swung it at a limb, heard its sharp hack, and felt it bite, something of my disgust and sorrow left me. I trimmed off several of the limbs; then with a few notches I laid out the work for the morrow and started to take a look at the other top.

As I passed the great splintered central trunk, out from the woods into the glade came Cousin Lon. The gap in the landscape must have brought him, as it brought me; but he could scarcely have heard me, since during the last five minutes my notching had been slight, my eye-measuring deliberate. He stopped for an instant when he saw me; then, as if ashamed to do otherwise, he came slowly forward.

I had been sorrier for Cousin Lon than resentful against him. Surely he was troubled by his conscience. Therefore, greatly preferring to be the injured party, I felt my advantage over him, and hailed him cheerfully.

He halted among the yellow splinters, but would not look at me; he sniffed the pungent resin. Slowly

his eye roved along the blasted tree. "Terrible stroke, that," he said at last, in acknowledgment of my greeting. Then he passed me and went closer to the central trunk.

Believing that to try to make him talk would be unkind, I laid down my axe and went to view the farther half of the pine. It was as long as the first, had fallen as swiftly, smashed right and left as destructively. Being now thoroughly practical, I calculated the work of cutting it up, and was saying to myself that here we had kindling for years, when suddenly I heard the sound of furious chopping.

For a moment I turned to look, uncomprehending. Cousin Lon was standing on one part of the split trunk, near where the two huge stems had joined. In his hands he was swinging my axe in breathless haste; I heard him panting. Then as his axeman's "Hah!" came to my ears I understood and, before I knew what I was doing, was running toward him.

Before I reached him I saw I was too late. He dropped the axe, stooped, and clawed from the wood an object which he held carefully in both hands. And stepping to the ground he faced me, triumphant.

My fascinated gaze, fixed on his find, knew it at once. The Thick Oval Box! Though slightly changed in shape by the pressure of the growing tree, it could be nothing else. On its dull surface the hasty axe had bared one streak of silvery lead;

the rest was lustreless. Here securely hidden all these years, and a thousand times I had been so near it!

As my eyes reluctantly left it, impelled by a strange idea, Cousin Lon's also ceased to caress his treasure. Our glances met. His, besides his triumph, showed sympathy.

"I'm sorry, Binney," he said.

As I put my new idea to the test of thought, I laughed aloud. "Sorry!" I cried. "Why, that box is mine!"

"Yours?" Startled, he held it closer to him.

"Mine!" I replied. "You claim the other, because it was found on your land. Then this is mine."

The argument confounded him, as his uncertain eye showed. "Why, no! Why, no!" he repeated.

As I felt a strong impulse swelling within me, and deliberately prepared to yield to it, I never thought more clearly in my life. Slow I may have been in other things, but not in seeing my way through this difficulty. There was one way, only one way to forestall Stidger's trickery, and my muscles stiffened for the attempt.

"Mine!" I answered, and my teeth closed on my lower lip. I sprang at my cousin and seized the box.

Our four hands were on it; his grip was firm; he was stronger than I. Yet I, too, was strong, and I was the quicker. Also I had the advantage

of attack and of the fury of my determination. It was finished soon. Shifting my grip, I crooked my arm in his; his leg I pinned with mine; I forced him backward till I bent him across the tree. With a twist of my body I could have broken his bones; but as I pressed with knee and shoulder his grip came apart. And I leaped away from him, the box in my hands.

Then of my deliberately seized advantage I repented as I faced my cousin. What beastly fury there had been on my face I know not; but on his I saw slow puzzlement and dull surprise. That was Cousin Lon, and my anger had been against not him, but Stidger. So I was sorry and on an impulse risked all that I had gained. I laid the precious box down on the tree and, taking my axe, threw it into the woods.

"I gave you no warning," I said. "Look, there is the box, and you are stronger than I. Come, let us fight for it—if you think you are right."

He had no heart for it. Though for a moment, after a glance at the prize that lay there, there gleamed in his eyes such a flame of fight that I glimpsed what it would be to meet him now, my last words disarmed him. The flame faded, and he shrank away.

"Wait," I said, more repentant still. I wished to tell him what further was in my mind. But he would not listen. His pallor, which for this moment had left him, returned. His eyes looked down. And with a drooping of the head, a gesture of the

hands, almost expressive of despair, he hurried away from me.

I, too, was soon away, safely carrying the new-found treasure. What machinery Stidger might put in motion to take it away from me I could not guess. My intention was to forestall him by putting it out of reach.

But where could I lay such a thing where no search-warrant could uncover it? There was no hiding-place in our house. I had no confidence in the safe-deposit vaults in Boston, for a writ would force the bank to give the treasure up. Think as I would, I saw nothing to do until, finding myself at the spring, and nearer to the house than I wanted to be, I sat down on the margin of the basin to consider the matter.

Even now, such was my half-guilty feeling, I had fears of interruption and looked about me for a temporary hiding-place. And then I saw what I could do. Of course! Not for nothing did I come of the buccaneer's blood.

Down on my knees I dropped by the side of the spring, and reached into the water. Not in the middle, where the water was deep and the sand shifting, but at the shallow side, I scooped among the silvery grains. Fast as I dug, the sand soon settled into place again; therefore quickly I made the hole as deep as I could, worked the box in, and swept the sand over it. With eager, nervous haste I smoothed the bottom, and then stood up and looked at it.

Slowly the clouded waters cleared. In the middle still danced the quartz grains; at the sides the bottom was level and still. Nothing showed change. The box might remain there safely for another seventy years.

I had scarcely, after my early chores, finished telling mother of what I had done, and had just put the question, "Did I do right?" when she pointed to the road.

"Stidger is coming."

Coming he was, at a quick walk that was almost a run, in a haste that kept him stumbling among the rough stones. For he had seen us on the porch, and was keeping his eyes on us lest we escape him. Foreseeing a stormy interview, I said to mother:

"I don't want him to think I am hiding anything. So will you shut up Jones?"

She put the dog safely out of the way and returned to me. Meanwhile, anticipating its use in exasperating our visitor, I took out one of the last of my Boston cigars and very leisurely trimmed its end.

Straight across the yard Stidger came at me. His bloodshot eyes were redder than ever; their rims seemed fiery. Ill health, evil temper, malicious thoughts showed upon every feature of his unwholesome face. Nowadays Margery tries to make me think better of him. Perhaps because I always roused his bile, he never showed himself to me except at his worst.

"I want," he rasped out when he was a few yards away from me and still advancing, "that box you stole an hour ago from your cousin. He has just told me."

Panting and angry, he halted within arm's length. At his sides his clinched hands shook, as if eager to be at the work of tearing the box from me. I snapped my penknife shut, put it in my pocket, and slowly took out a match.

"I like plain speaking, Mr. Stidger," said I, "but let's stick to the truth. I didn't steal the box from my cousin: I took it by force. And if you want to know why, it was because of you."

"Of me?" he shrilled.

"I could have trusted him with it," I said. "But I intend that it shall never get into your hands. From this minute," and I lighted my match, "you are out of this legal tangle into which you have dragged my cousin and me." I puffed at the cigar. "You are permanently side-tracked." I threw the match away and, squinting across the end of the cigar, saw both that it was lighted well and that his temper was blazing furiously. Nor did I care. "Now, Mr. Stidger," I went on, "with that box in my possession as a pledge, I intend to sign an agreement with my cousin, before a magistrate, that the terms of the old will shall stand. Only one lawyer will be present, and that lawyer will not be you."

He was in a strange white heat. Every trace of color had left his face except the uncanny redness

of his eyes, the vent-holes of the furnace within. No man that I ever saw could so visibly burn with consuming fury. And he shook with the effort to contain himself.

"Give it to me!" he quavered with a sharp, high hoarseness. "Give it to me now!"

I shook my head. "It's hidden. And I can hide as well as the old buccaneer. No search-warrant, no writ, will ever get that box."

As he saw that I told the truth, and realized himself to be completely baffled, with that same gritting of the teeth which once had startled me, he moved his hand swiftly to his hip. Now mother and I are peaceful folk, knowing nothing of the carrying of weapons. And yet the man's action conveyed to us both, and instantly, the notion of danger. She screamed.

As for me, quicker than I can now explain, and purely instinctively, I was on my feet and standing over him. My fist was ready.

"Have you a weapon there?" I demanded.

His hand dropped at his side. "No!" he cried.

"Lucky for you," I replied. "I would have knocked your teeth down your throat. And lucky for you, too, that when you came I sent the dog to be locked up. If he had seen that action of yours he would have leaped at your throat. Now go, and send in your bill to my cousin, and leave us in peace."

I had so startled him by the swiftness of my threat that for a moment he remained fixed where

he stood. But he gathered himself together, turned, and in a shambling trot hurried out the gate.

"Binney!" cried mother, clutching me, "I know he had a pistol there. He will try to shoot you!"

"He could not hit me at ten feet," I answered, in contempt of the man's shaking hand. "He could not get me unless he jabbed the muzzle into me from behind, and against that Jones will keep me safe."

CHAPTER XXXI

My triumph over Stidger was very short, for as he passed out the gate I realized where he was going. To Margery—and my thoughts switched violently. I ought to have wished to tell my news to Gertrude. Instead, I felt that I must see Margery. Nor did I so much want to explain my actions to her as to demand that she explain herself to me. For every thought of satisfaction at defeating Stidger vanished before the haunting recollection of his hand upon her shoulder. I needed to hear her own lips tell me that she loathed him.

"Mother," I said, "I want to see Margery before Stidger gets back to her."

"Half an hour to supper," she reminded me.

"I'll be back in time," I assured her.

So I hurried through the woods, where the leaves had ceased their dripping and the path was already drying under foot. Stidger's route by the road was five times as long as mine, and I knew that I could find Margery first.

Now Joe, nicely drenched, had come in soon after the storm, and I had supposed him to be still in his room until I came upon him, just beyond the wall. The sight of him with Bertie Stidger stopped me

dead. I had never reasoned that during his residence at Stidger's he must have become very intimate with the child.

Joe was seated on a boulder that lay beside the path. His arm was around her. Bertie, on his knee, her head against his shoulder, was looking, absorbed, up into his face. He was smiling down at her, and I heard his words: "And so he cried aloud, 'Open Sesame!'"

The story of "Ali Baba," per Joe Rodey, vice Binney Hartwell, forgotten!

But where did Joe, waif, charity boy, scrub lawyer's half-starved clerk, learn the story of "Ali Baba?" Somehow into his sordid surroundings had shone the light of the fairy-tale, and now he was reflecting it into hers. Pity to interrupt such happy absorption—yet, after all, I scarcely broke into it. For though at my footfall they started at the fear that I was Stidger, at the sight of me they dropped into security again. They smiled as I passed by—smiled dreamily. She was already settling against his shoulder again, and I had gone but a little way beyond them when I heard Joe's voice proceeding:

"And then the cave opened."

I wondered, after I had left them well behind, whether I ought to have warned them that Stidger, in an angry mood, might soon be looking for Bertie. But they were safe enough. So as I went on I fell to thinking of Joe, good fellow, whose chief troubles were those of others, and whose cares

were to make his friends happy, with an undivided heart, no pledges to keep, no perplexities in his simple duties. I would willingly have changed places with him, if only I might name the one who should lean against my shoulder.

The thought ought to have checked me in my haste. What business had I to come seeking Margery on an errand to which Gertrude might object. But I recalled Stidger, and plunged on with some fierceness. I must know what was going on.

Margery was on the door-step, sitting gazing at the vacancy in the landscape where the double pine ought to have been. Her first words showed me that she was thinking of it. "Binney, I shall miss it so!"

I sat down beside her. "And to think what it has been concealing all these years!"

"It is strange!" she mused. And then, not with blame, but as asking for an explanation which she was sure would be forthcoming, she inquired: "Why did you take the box from father?"

"I will tell you presently," I replied. "But while we are alone, Margery, tell me—tell me——"

It was very hard to say. I had come boldly to begin the question, only to realize that I had no excuse for asking it. Stammering, I stopped. She asked: "Well?" She was still looking away.

It must be said! I made the plunge. "Tell me what Stidger meant, there by the spring, by putting his hand on your shoulder!"

Seeing her figure stiffen, I knew that I had in-

truded. Slowly she turned her head and looked at me. Her lips were firmly set, her brow bent, and with an inward recoil I recognized that she looked just a little—defiant.

"Am I," she asked very coolly, "not yet old enough to have a man of my own?"

Was it possible? Without power to speak, but shudderingly chilled, I stared at her. Not even the shock of the discovery of Mr. Worthen's treachery had brought upon me such cold dismay.

"Which reminds me," she said, beginning to rise, "that I ought to make sure if his supper is coming on properly."

His supper! Roused, I caught her wrist. "Margery, do you mean this?"

Quite composedly she took her place again. She prepared to speak, but with such a business-like manner, as if the affair were entirely comprehensible, that I was frightened and released her wrist. She looked at it, rubbed it a little, and then, "Why not?" she asked. "Where is there a better man for me to take?" And as if open to conviction, she sat and waited for my answer.

Unanswerable! For my tongue failed me when I tried to cry out: "Take me!" I must first get my freedom from Gertrude.

Margery had no mercy. The smile of kindly reasonableness with which she spoke again was a most awful witness of her state of mind. "If a girl is tired of loneliness," she explained, "if she has had a glimpse of outside things and wants

more—why, when a man comes after her she does a bit of thinking, that's all."

As she uttered this appalling axiom she was quite placid. I was stung into incoherent protest. "No!" I cried. "No, never!"

"But why not?" she asked, smiling patiently.

Gertrude! I must find Gertrude! Until I could see her and free myself, and then come honestly to Margery, I could have no rest. I sprang up.

"Why, Binney," asked Margery with innocent kindness, "what is it?"

Choking with dismay, disgust, revolt, I turned from her. Oh, to find Gertrude!

And here Gertrude was, riding briskly into the barnyard, waving her hand to us. Margery started up and went to meet her, while I stood watching her in gloomy doubt. If I were half a man, which I questioned, I would find a way to get myself clear of her. For what a contrast there was between her artificiality and Margery's sweet naturalness! How could I for so long have failed to see it? And yet when Gertrude's quick eye glanced from Margery hastening forward, to me hanging back, and snapped with an "It's time I came," I felt that I was standing guilty before my lawful owner.

I always sulk when I'm opposed, and I sulked now. Gertrude had to call me to come and help her down.

"What is it?" she whispered in my ear as I lifted her.

"I want to speak with you," I blurted, taking no pains to prevent Margery's hearing.

Gertrude drew away and scanned my scowling face. Then "Oho!" she laughed, and saucily tossed her head. While I swore bitterly to myself, she left me standing like a hitching-post, the reins in my hand.

"Margery!" she cried, "I've come to supper. Will you take me in?"

Margery visibly hesitating, I thought of the cruelty that Gertrude was committing. Into hampered Margery's household, with its simple fare, its ancient table-fixings, its odd mixture of persons, Gertrude must needs come prying. Nor would she be refused.

"Don't turn me away," she begged as Margery groped for an excuse. And twining her arm into Margery's, she drew her close, coaxing. "It's so lovely here, and so dull at the hotel. Mr. Col-lester's gone; he just sent me a good-by and vanished in chase of a train. And Mr. Stidger will be here, and I want to make his acquaintance. I passed him coming on your road. He was talking to himself and scowled at me delightfully! He must be so interesting!"

This was said with bewildering sweetness. Stidger interesting? Gertrude knew better. Yet Margery found it difficult to make a stand.

"We live so differently——"

Gertrude let her get no further. "Oh, I like simple living! Don't you know I often long for

it? And I'll help with the dish-washing. I know how."

Margery resigned herself. In much disgust, I hitched the horse. How could I now speak privately to either of them? But sullenly I stayed, standing by the horse and watching the two girls.

It was now that Joe appeared with Bertie. The story had been finished, and mindful not to vex her father, Joe had brought the child home. Here was the diversion that I had vaguely wished for. Gertrude cried, "Oh, the darling!" and made for startled Bertie. And Margery, seizing her chance, walked toward the house.

Vaguely intending to make some kind of an appeal, I stepped in her way. "Margery!"

But she had caught Gertrude's own perversity. She looked me coolly in the face. "I must set my table," she said, and passed me by. But at the door-step she paused, calling to Joe. And he, leaving the others, went to her.

Well, if I had lost one chance, here was another. I went where Gertrude, on her knees, was trying to cuddle Bertie. Only trying. For the child, her delicate face very serious and her eyes gravely studying this stranger, held stiffly in Gertrude's arms the thin figure which she had yielded so willingly to Joe.

Gertrude, thus successfully repulsed, and somewhat flushed at the open failure, looked up at me. "Isn't she a beauty?" she demanded, to cover her defeat, which she already admitted. Where Ger-

trude was not at once victorious, she rarely persisted.

"Gertrude," I said as she stood up, releasing the child, who quickly slipped away, "walk over here to the wall. I want a few words with you."

Even had I been less peremptory, the sting of little Bertie's repulsion had lost me my opportunity. No one but feels a child's suspicions. Gertrude at least was cut by them and meant to wound me, too. She tossed her head. "Indeed, Mr. Frowning Man! But I am not going to the wall with any one."

"Right here, then," I said doggedly. "No one is listening. Gertrude, I want to say——"

She was not rude to me, merely charmingly independent. And with a little sidewise, taunting smile, pointing at the same time to the others, she showed me that I was not to have my way. "Here is more fun. Look!"

For Stidger, with his customary scowl, had come marching up to Joe and Margery where they stood by the step. Gertrude took some quick steps nearer, and perforce I followed her. What the fellow might do was too important for me to neglect.

He thrust out his jaw as he lowered at Joe. "What you doing with one of my witnesses?"

"Why, really," answered Joe mildly, "I had no idea that she was one."

"I am not!" cried Margery, startled.

He turned on her with what he meant for politeness. "I may need you," he said.

"But I don't want to testify," she protested, very much dismayed.

"If the court summons you," he returned, "you will have to come."

She warned him. "I can't testify on your side."

Her opposition was already wearing his politeness away. Under his gnawed mustache his mouth was grim. "You can prove what I want proved," he said inexorably.

From this dialogue Joe turned away. "Binney, what about supper?"

"Tell mother not to wait," I answered. While he went, I lingered, for if Stidger was to become ill-natured, I felt ugly enough to want to be there. But his first victim was his daughter, upon whom his eyes fell as she stood shrinking by Margery's skirts.

And yet I think, to do him justice, that he did not mean to frighten her. He felt as one who stands alone, trying to call to his side a natural ally. And so, with an attempted smile that fitted wryly on his lingering scowl, he stretched out his hand to Bertie. "Come," he said. And with an effort he added: "Dear."

Margery says she has seen him play clumsily with the child, evenings after supper. Yet always the little one met him with caution, doubtful how soon he would tire or scold. How could she now respond? With a quick little shake of the golden locks she slipped farther behind Margery.

It was bad enough for him that she should do it, worse still that I should see. The deep flush that came to his forehead was not from anger, for to my surprise I saw the quiver of his lip and heard

the little catching of his breath. The man had feelings! For the first time I felt sorry for him. And rather than humiliate him by staying, I went away.

I did not wish to follow Joe, for he might have lingered for me, and I did not want to talk. I had been defeated by both Margery and Gertrude; Margery had, in addition, confessed to a horrible plan; and I had been deeply struck by the touch of humanity in Stidger. So I struck off into the woods, meaning to wander for a while and get home a little late for supper.

What happened later I know from Margery's words, given me in solemn earnestness and careful accuracy, when that day's doings were finished.

"I believe," said Margery, feeling obliged to state her convictions, "that if Gertrude had not been there nothing would have happened. Mr. Stidger turned around to glare at you, but you were going away, and he seemed relieved until his eye fell on Gertrude.

"As for her, Binney, I can't suppose she knew what she was doing. Her tact just deserted her; certainly she cannot have realized the strength of his feelings. For he was very ready to break out against any one. The fact that he had shown his hurt was enough to exasperate him. All this Gertrude missed—or else she did not think about him at all, as if he did not matter.

"At any rate, as he stood scowling she came forward, and spoke in her breezy offhand manner,

as if mentioning facts that, of course, everybody understood. 'Children are ungrateful things,' she said. 'Very little affection there, Mr. Stidger.'

"He turned an unhealthy gray. I think that if he believed in one thing, it was in Bertie's perfection; and if he had a hope, it was that she would love him. Not that Gertrude destroyed either his faith or his hope; but for the minute she made both of them seem like secrets that were exposed for us to smile at.

"That could only make him savage. He would take his disappointment out on some one; I saw I could count on that. But I did not know that your telling him your plan for an agreement with father had made Stidger feel that he must hurry with both father and me. All I knew was that for the first time I felt afraid of him. Yet when I felt myself wishing that either you or father were with me, I knew that I ought to be glad that you both were away. His eye looked too spiteful.

"So I was very glad to slip into the house to set the table for supper. Bertie I sent up-stairs, to wash her face and hands and brush her hair. Gertrude half offered to help me, but really she was quite content to sit on the door-step and look at the hills, and call out remarks to me through the screen door. Of course I couldn't attend to her if I wanted to have my table and my supper right, and so I merely answered as I could, meanwhile going back and forth between the two ends of the kitchen. You know the stove is at the farther

end, quite out of sight of Gertrude and almost out of hearing.

"At the window by the stove Stidger came and stood. I had to go to the stove every few minutes, and so passed close by him. Now such liberties as Stidger had attempted with me were such as you saw in the woods, a touch on the shoulder, or the sleeve. They were usually so slight and stealthy that I doubted if I had felt them at all. So I had not snubbed him for them. But now three different times, when I bent over the stove, he touched me, on the arm, the shoulder, and at last my neck. The first time, because I doubted, I paid no attention. The second time I knew, and drew away; but I didn't speak because of Gertrude's nearness. But when he touched my neck——!

"I pretended to you, Binney, this afternoon when you spoke of Stidger and me. You had had your months of liberty; I had had but one day away from the farm. You and Gertrude evidently had come to an understanding, and I couldn't see why you should grudge me any freedom. So I was just perverse enough to pretend that I was considering marrying Stidger.

"But when I felt his hand on my neck, it made me shudder. For a long time I had put up with him, for father's sake. But now I knew how much I disliked the man. You can't know, I was surprised to learn myself, how nearly a girl can come to hating a man who is familiar with her.

"I said to him that he must either stop touching me, or go away.

“‘I must talk with you,’ he said. ‘And that city thing outside must not hear.’

“‘Very well, then,’ said I. ‘Talk now, before father comes home, and have it over with.’

“I thought I knew what his attentions meant, and what he would say. Your farm would be his as his fee in the lawsuit, and I should marry him and live there, to keep him comfortable and bring Bertie up. It’s the sort of business proposition a girl can’t resent, however much it goes against her ideals.

“But I never suspected what he believed I thought of him. Because, for decency’s sake, I never laughed or sneered at him, as I suppose most women did whom he approached, he believed I cared for him. He had no modesty, and so he thought it sure. He gloated over me before he spoke, and in his eyes I saw that his feeling for me was just a horrible—appetite.

“And that insults a girl. Before he even spoke, the place where he touched my neck burned hot from shame. I would have backed away from him, but he caught my hands and began to speak.

“His hands were cold and damp like the touch of a snake; but his eyes were fiery, and his words scorched. There was no leading to the point; he just took me for granted and told me his plans. We needn’t wait till he had your farm; it might take a long time, for the law was slow. But that would all come out right, and meanwhile we could marry now—now! And clinging to me, and pulling me closer, he tried to kiss me.

"For a few moments it was just a degrading struggle to keep his head away from mine. For I had to fight him silently, lest Gertrude should know. He was stronger than I had supposed; but I am strong, too, and I was angry. And so I was able to throw him off just as father came in at the door.

"Father is a pale man, as you know. Before he understood I think he grew paler than common. But after he had looked from Stidger to me, and had seen the anger in my face, then he flushed red and turned on Stidger so threateningly that the man shrank away.

"'You touched her?' said father. 'Explain quick, if you value your skin!'

"You know Stidger's doggedness. In spite of his natural drawing back from father, he quickly became sullen. 'What if I did touch the girl?' he answered. 'There's no harm, if I mean to marry her.'

"Father was so surprised that he turned and looked at me. 'He means to marry you?' he asked, as if to make sure of his hearing.

"'So he says,' I told him. 'But he hasn't consulted me.'

"Perhaps up till then Stidger had laid my struggle to bashfulness. But now he glared at me, and I knew that by a sudden shift of his mind he was ready to hate me as he hated all the world except Bertie. No, he was ready to hate me more than the rest, for now I could make every one laugh at him.

"Father had turned to him. 'And how will you support her, if you can't pay your own way down in Athol?'

"If Stidger had entirely lost hope of me, or if he knew that father would have been against him, he wouldn't have explained. But he answered cautiously. 'You will need some help on that other farm.'

"'You would get the run of it, then,' said father, 'so that you could look for the last box. I'm likely to give you the chance, I think.'

"'Ask him,' I added, 'whether he expects to rent the farm, or whether he counts on owning it.'

"Then Stidger knew that both of us were against him, and his little eyes glimmered redder and redder. And as you say he has done so often with you, Binney, but never before in my sight, he lost all thought of gaining his purpose by any other way than by snatching it.

"'Of course I'll own it!' he snapped. 'It will be my own. How else can you pay my bill?' And he laughed as triumphantly as if he had served father for years and were pressing for payment.

"Nothing explains him to me but the fierceness of his selfishness. He was one of those scavenging birds that hurry down before their victim is dead. That is how he defeated himself so often. And father was not dead—not yet, not yet! Listen, Binney, to what my father said:

"'Al Stidger,' said father, standing up big and calm, and speaking with that quiet force to which

every one has to listen, 'this afternoon Binney Hartwell took that box away from me, and I was ashamed of hounding him so that he had to do it. Now I have been thinking what I must do to set things right with him again. For there shan't be any more law between the Hartwells, Stidger. God forgive me for listening to you! I thought of my girl's future—and all the time you were planning this against me. Go and make out your bill. And while you are doing it I will walk over to the other farm and tell Binney the box shall be his, to pay for all my unkindness to him.'

"I was almost dizzy with happiness to hear him talk so nobly. But Stidger turned gray as ashes and came staggering forward, and caught father by the coat. 'You won't!' he cried. 'To have that boy beat me! To lose all my work! You won't! You can't!'

"Father very calmly unclasped his hands. 'I can and I will,' he said. 'Your work was your own speculation, and you've lost.' And, holding Stidger by both wrists with one hand, he set him back and released him.

"The little man came running forward. He was snarling; he struck father on the breast with both hands—one, two. And then while father, quite indifferent, stood and looked at him, Stidger rushed to the stairs and stamped up them to his room.

"Oh, thank God that I ran to father then, and clung to him, and kissed him! Thank God that he kissed me, too, with tears in his eyes, and called

me his dear daughter! I shall always remember it, always! But very soon he stood upright. 'There!' he said, 'I'll just step over and make my peace with the boy, so that I can eat my supper in comfort. And to-morrow we'll get that sneak out of the house.'

"He went like a soldier, and from the doorway I watched him go. So fine and tall, my father; and the strongest man in town, except perhaps you, Binney. I had forgotten Gertrude, who had moved away from the door-step, until I heard her speak at my elbow:

"Such an exciting life we live on the farm! Why Margery, what a proposal!"

"I couldn't bear to talk with her then, and went to the shed for more wood. And she went out again. What happened after that you know better than I."

Yes, I can tell the rest of the story best.

CHAPTER XXXII

AFTER much lingering on the path, expecting me to join him, Joe had finally reached home. Mother at once sent him back. "You go and fetch Binney," she said. "Tell him that supper will be spoiled." It was indeed spoiled before any of us were ready to eat it.

About the time that Joe started back, I, wandering in the woods, had come to an end of my thinking. Gertrude's perversity had vexed me; I was disgusted at her evasion. Margery's scheme worried me: could she really mean it? But I had found a partial solution. I would ride around after supper to the other farm, escort Gertrude back to the hotel, and on the way secure my freedom.

Therefore I started back to the path, which was not far away. My mind was unworried; I was so certain that I should soon be free of Gertrude that my spirits were almost joyful, so that I strode along noisily. Thus it was that I approached the path within a hundred feet before I heard any sound from it. Then at a sudden loud cry—demanding? threatening?—I stopped and listened.

I heard only a murmur, as of a quieter voice answering. And through the thick leaves I could see nothing.

There came a snarl of anger, so like a beast's

that even at that distance my hair rose up. The snarl ended in a "There!" that sounded like a yell of vengeance satisfied. A choked scream answered, and a heavy fall. Then feet scurried in flight. While, with my skin creeping, I still listened, I heard a single sob. And then was perfect silence.

Though now I sprang to action, and as I ran kept saying to myself, "Something has happened," my mind knew more than that. Otherwise I should never have run so frantically, blocked by the bushes, stumbling over roots, recoiling from trees, all in that short distance. More than a mere something had happened: my mind shuddered with the certainty of murder. And when I came out on the path, by the rock where Joe had sat with Bertie, I was not surprised at what I saw.

Prostrate and motionless, there lay Cousin Lon. His frowning eyes were staring upward, but there was no light in them. His pale lips were firmly set. One hand, red-fingered, was pressed above his heart; blood, only a little, had trickled out. And I knew as I prepared to try to revive him that the attempt was hopeless.

Hopeless indeed. Though I knelt and listened, there was no breath; and though I felt his wrist, no pulse. The weapon that made that wound, so accurately placed, must have struck deep enough to reach the heart.

Where was the weapon? Even as I prepared to rise and look for it I saw it lying at his feet? Four inches of reddened blade!

It was not until, standing, I had wiped the weapon with a bunch of grass that I suddenly knew it as my own. The clasp-knife that I had lost, and that Stidger, as I believed, had found! Was it this that he had offered to draw on me that afternoon? At any rate here was proof, supposing any to be needed, of the murderer.

But I needed no proof. No one else would have done the deed. No one else was so passionate that, at some check to his dearest scheme, he was ready to strike. Proof absolute!

I was so absorbed that I did not hear the approaching steps. Some one gasped: "Oh, Binney!"

There stood Joe. Pale, trembling visibly, his mouth wide open for his hasty breathing, he was staring at me in fright. I stepped aside for him to see the body.

"See, he is dead already. With this he was stabbed to the heart. You know this knife? It is my own."

"Yes," answered Joe, shaking violently and shrinking away. "Yes, I remember."

"I lost it weeks ago. Stidger found it. This murder is his work."

Joe reeled and clutched a tree. "Stidger? Oh, yes—oh, yes! I—I did not think."

I thought he was going to faint, and sprang to support him. "Let me sit down," he begged, and sat and wept. "Don't blame me, Binney," he said when at last he let me raise him. "This shook me terribly. And what now?"

"I must carry the body home," I said. "No, don't try to help me; you aren't yet fit. Just follow me. We ought to find the man at the house. He won't expect us to come on him so soon."

So, carrying the dead weight of my cousin's body, his head, for all my care, lolling terribly, I strode indignantly along the path. Behind me Joe followed, until at last I heard his voice, still unsteady:

"Binney, we ought to have left him as he was, for the police to examine the place."

"It is done now," I answered, going on. "And to have left him—how horrible!"

I hurried on, in burning haste to catch the murderer before he should escape. Behind me I heard Joe trotting in the endeavor to keep up, until again he spoke:

"If Stidger ran this way, we have tramped out all his footmarks."

This at least was true; the remark showed that Joe was master of himself again. We had now, leaving the woods, reached the hard, dry gravel, where no print would show; but back in the loamy footpath, soft from the recent rain, our feet might have obliterated all traces of flight. And surely where the deed was done no betraying footprint could have remained.

"That is too late to remedy," I replied. "We must go on."

My own speed was slackening now, because of my burden. Dead weight! Never before had I

carried, and never again do I wish to bear, such a dragging load. My back, arms, and shoulders were weakening.

"We are almost at the house," suggested Joe, at last. "Oughtn't I to go ahead and prepare Margery?"

But again it was too late. I had stepped into the barnyard, and instantly heard Gertrude's shriek. In immediate response, Margery came running from the house. My crowning blunder!

Yet Margery stood still, without screaming or fainting, while I brought her father to her. Pale and intent, she saw at once that there was no hope for him. "Inside, upon the sofa," she directed. And in the big kitchen, on the couch in the dark corner, I laid my cousin's body.

Very sadly, forgetting the business of my quest, I stood while Margery knelt at her father's side, closed his eyes, smoothed his hair, and kissed his pale lips. Joe was behind me somewhere; when I glanced about for Gertrude I saw her by the window, shrunk against the casing and watching me in terror.

Margery rose and laid the hands together, crossed upon the breast. She murmured quietly: "I must wash the blood away." But next she turned to me.

"Binney," she asked, "how did it happen?"

Her manner was very gentle. And she stood quietly, waiting, as once before that day, for the explanation which surely I could not deny her.

And I had no glimmer of her dreadful suspicion. I took the weapon from my pocket. "It was with my old knife," I explained.

Now she did draw away a little, beginning to breathe quickly.

Then I heard on the stair the tread of Stidger's feet. Down he came, actually humming to himself. The old, old method of showing peace of mind. As if the man ever hummed, except for such a purpose! As if he ever had peace of mind, even in his sleep. I watched to see how he would act.

Carelessly into the kitchen. Not forgetting to scowl at the sight of me. Starting at the sight of the body and hastily coming to its side; quickly making sure, by a hand on one wrist (could he have been sure before now?) that Cousin Lon was dead; and then coldly, nastily, sneering at Joe and me.

"Well, which of you two did it?"

Over by her window, Gertrude smothered a little shriek.

"Which, Joe," I asked and smiled at the good fellow, who now, his color returned, stood steadfastly by my side. He was studying Stidger very closely, and answered with much deliberation:

"It had all happened before I arrived on the spot."

Stidger's eye lighted up. How much that answer meant to him I now saw. Suppose, for instance, that Joe and I had come to the spot together. Now he believed himself safe.

"You were coming this way alone?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Joe.

"Then where had he been?" And he pointed at me.

"I do not know."

"Yet he left the house soon after you, and a good quarter-hour before Lon Hartwell. You found him by the body?"

"Yes," answered Joe.

"And—he," pointing to the couch, "was already dead?"

"Yes."

The sneer of triumph grew on Stidger's face. "And—he," pointing at me, "was holding the knife?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps wiping it?"

"He was wiping it."

Stidger laughed aloud. "They had a quarrel this afternoon. This—this Hartwell attacked his cousin violently. Now he has done it again." Again the short, harsh laugh as he pointed at me: "Caught, you fool!"

I, too, was about to laugh, when I heard a gasp behind me, so full of shocked conviction, so near a sob of fright! And Gertrude, when I looked, was sidling toward the door. Her shrinking, when I moved toward her, amounted to a start away from me. All her certainty of self, her jaunty self-possession, gone, quite gone. "No, no!" she gasped. "Keep away!"

Her eyes, full of fear, her mouth, weakly quivering, brought home to me her meaning. "Gertrude!" I cried, "don't you understand that he did it?"

"He?" cried Gertrude. "He has been in the house ever since Mr. Hartwell went away."

Entirely taken aback, I could only stand and try to think.

"He has been up-stairs," gasped Gertrude, now almost breathless. "He hasn't come down-stairs at all. But you—! And your knife—! Joe found you wiping it! Aach!"

Her hysterical cry shuddered in the room. And now she showed such panic-eagerness to get away, such dread to be stopped! Sidling along the wall, watching me in breathless fright, Gertrude made a sudden dash for the door and stumbled out.

In the silence which followed I could only stand gloomily, looking at the door by which she left. She believed it of me! She could believe it of me! I could hear her, outside, still in her panic, rattling the chain of the hitching-post. I heard it, when released, fall with a little clash against the stone. She began imploring the horse: "Stand still! Oh, Bessie, stand still!" Then the jingling of the bit, the squeaking of the saddle, and her panting "Whoa! Whoa!" as she struggled to mount. And at last came the slap of the reins, the thud of hoofs on the turf, the sudden rattling of the gravel, sharp at first, then dying away.

Yes, Gertrude believed it of me!

As I drew a long breath I felt a sudden dread to

face the others. Did Joe think this of me? Did Margery?

"Well," said Stidger briskly, gloatingly, "I'll just run down to the village and get the constable." I heard him take one step.

"Close the door, Binney," said Joe sharply.

"Quick!" Margery cried.

My heart leaped, for my questions were answered. Quickly indeed I shut the door and, leaning against it, looked at them. Each was poised, intent upon the trapping of Stidger, heart and soul with me. And yet I now knew that earlier they had not been.

"You too thought it of me, Margery?"

"How could I help it, Binney, until you said he did it?"

"And you, Joe?"

"Oh, my dear boy, consider what I saw!"

"But you both took my word!" I cried, elated. And at Stidger, standing in the middle of the room, I shook my finger. "We shall get you now!"

"Let me go!" he demanded.

"No!"

"This is assault," he warned me.

"So long as it is not murder," I retorted, "call it what you wish."

There stood by the wall a little pine table. I took it up and set it in the middle of the room, and before it placed a chair.

"Sit down there," I said to Stidger. "I want to talk with you."

He eyed me, as he obeyed, with much contempt. Very scornfully he made himself comfortable, crossing his legs beneath the table and squaring his elbows on the chair-arms. "So you mean to prove that I did it?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Pah!" he snapped. "First get around the fact that I have been up-stairs ever since Lon Hartwell left the house. That girl that ran away, she'll witness it. Margery," and he turned sharply to her, "she knows it."

"It puzzles me," said Margery slowly. "Yes, I thought you were in the house."

"See," he said to me, "that's clear. Explain away, next, your fight with Lon this afternoon. Show, after that, why you didn't go straight home from here when you left, a half-hour ago. And then explain how it happens that you were found wiping that knife."

I looked at the knife as I held it in my hand. "The case looks pretty good for you, doesn't it?" I asked. To myself I admitted that it did. Many such cases, not so good as this against me, had hanged their men. But I was not troubled. The knife would prove everything. I opened it and stuck it into the table before him, so that it stood upright and quivering like a live thing. "Look at that," I said. "No, look at it!"

For he was not able. I saw him make the attempt and fail. His wavering glance looked at the table, at Margery, at Joe, defied me. But on the knife he could not fix his eye.

"Where has it been this month and more?" I demanded.

"Where?" The question relieved him. He changed position and lolled back. "In your pocket, of course."

"In yours!" I rejoined. "Weeks ago I accused you of finding and keeping it."

"Looking forward to this," he retorted. He challenged: "Prove that I had it!"

"If I can prove it," I answered, "I have you."

"But there's no proof," he sneered. "And what of the fact that I have been up-stairs all this while?"

"I will believe that," I replied, "when I find that there are no heel-marks on the shed-roof outside your window. Ah, you see a little light? From every window in the back of the house I have climbed to the ground by way of the roof when I was a boy; yes, and climbed in again, too, as I now believe somebody did in the rain last summer, when our house was entered, and a search was made for the copy of the old will. Are there fresh scratches on those old shingles now? Have you nails in your heels?"

In spite of himself he tucked his feet under him. Then with a spiteful look he deliberately planted them in front of him again. "That will prove nothing," he asserted.

I looked down at his shoes. "There's black mud, not yet dried, on the edges of your soles and heels. Perhaps there's some of it on the roof. I

fancy that Joe and I haven't quite tramped out all the footprints on that muddy path. Perhaps your shoes will fit those that remain."

"You've been reading detective stories," he scoffed.

"Mr. Stidger," said I, "all these proofs of mine are doubtful. But some thing, some little thing, that I can't now foresee but that you can never forestall, will come and lay bare everything to us. Between you and me, I depend on the knife. Can you look at it now any better than a few minutes ago? Try it. No, try it!"

Again his unwilling glance could not turn to it. "See," I said, "you know you're afraid of it."

"Listen!" warned Joe.

Bertie was coming down the stairs. We heard the careful placing of her feet on the steep flight. For a moment all of us were startled, and no one thought of turning her back. But Stidger, with a glance at the couch, said: "Don't—don't let her——!"

Quickly Joe, snatching up the afghan that lay there, spread it over the body.

Bertie, hastening as she neared the bottom, where the light was better, came into the room. She had carefully brushed out the thick hair and had made herself very neat; for in these things she had been forced to do for herself, to satisfy the native daintiness that was so noticeable in her. But when she saw us watching her she stood still. "Why do you look at me so?"

The sudden coming of the child had troubled every one of us, and we had no answer. But her eye fell on the knife, and she needed none.

"Why," she said, and came a step nearer. Her little face lit up; her eyes grew larger. "Why, father, it's—" She was doubtful, looked at him and then at me, and came close to the table.

"Yes, it's the same!" she cried. "With Binney's initials on the handle. The one you had last week in Athol, father—I remember!" And she clapped her little hands.

Clapped her hands—and her words gave him over to death!

"Binney," she asked, "isn't it yours?"

I could not speak. My throat was choked with horror. Death from the hand that he loved so!

"It's his, Bertie," said Joe, very gently. "But we were talking over something important, and supper isn't quite ready. Will you run outdoors for a little while?"

She looked at us a little wistfully, but obediently trotted toward the door. "Don't be long," she begged, and went out.

When her footsteps had died away there was silence. We three looked at the man on whom proof had so overwhelmingly descended.

He did not look at us. It was as if we had suddenly become little things, or nothing, as compared with the great reality that faced him. With head sunk low, he stared at the silent witness, the knife, upright in the table. And I, for one, ac-

knowledgeed in him a certain unsuspected greatness.

What plan of life did he recall then? As passively he accepted his defeat, what theory, greater than any action of his life, dictated his course? Anger he put by; hatred of the world had passed; spite at me, who so many times had balked him, did not stir in him. He merely saw the end, and prepared to press on to it.

Rising, he plucked the knife from the table.

I did not understand. My first act was to make sure that I was between him and Margery. Then I was preparing to disarm him, when Joe said, very quietly: "Let him go."

Puzzled, because I had learned that Joe was so much wiser than I, I hesitated.

Stidger paid us no attention at all. Wearily, and not as if we were there, but as if he were alone in the universe, he turned to the stairs. In this there was nothing assumed; I felt that he had forgotten us. And out of respect for a defeat which I knew myself incapable of appreciating, I let him go.

Step by step he mounted the hollow stairway. His slow footfall creaked in the hallway above. I heard his door shut. And still considerably puzzled, I turned to Joe.

With an uplifted hand that warned me not to call Margery's attention, Joe stood listening.

For what? Margery had gone to the couch in the corner. Bertie, at the distant bars, was calling:

"Co-boss!" I knew from Joe's attitude that he was listening for the next sound from the story above. And in a flash I knew what the sound was to be. Joe had foreknown it from the first. Shuddering, I too waited. I did not need Joe's expression of calm certainty to tell me that this was the best way.

Stidger was very quick. A distant coughing sob, the dulled sound of a fall, the slightest rattle of the windows. We both looked toward Margery. On her knees and sobbing, she had not heard.

I could not move, so was I chilled and shaken; but Joe very quietly went up the stairs. After a minute, very quietly he came down. His sober eyes said to me: "It's done!"

I wanted the open air! Margery was absorbed in her grief. "Keep Bertie out of doors till I come back," I said to Joe. "I'm going to fetch mother."

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN the little graveyard of the Hartwells I dug Cousin Lon's grave. The occupation, they say, makes some morose and some ghastlily facetious; true solemnity does not spring from it. As for me, do what I would I could not fix my mind on the lesson of the suddenness of death, though violence had taken two almost from before my eyes. I tried, quite honestly, to impress myself with the need of living well in order to be prepared for death; but always I soon found myself remembering and planning.

Memory dwelt on Gertrude. In spite of my denial she had believed me my cousin's slayer. Though it was somewhat shameful to recall, I saw with satisfaction the picture of her frightened eyes, her gasping mouth, her hands shaking as she held them before her to keep me away. In Gertrude's mind at the moment there may have been fear of scandal, care for her future, perhaps even genuine horror of the murderer. Certainly there was no trust in me.

Where had she fled to? For more than two days I had had no sight or word of her.

But wherever she now was, whatever she might once have thought of me, surely the understanding

between her and me, the bond she had put me under, was broken. I was free to do as I wished, if it was not too soon to wish it.

Wish and plan I must. Though this deep grave was not yet ready for its occupant, I was busy disposing of his daughter. Often though I reproached myself, each time I was soon busy again, painting Margery's picture as I liked to see her. Even the memory of her fighting with her grief could not stop my selfish planning. She was so capable, so sweetly composed, so brave. And she, if once I could win her, would never desert me.

As the four walls of the grave and the heaps of earth rose above my head, they seemed to shut me in with brighter and brighter thoughts. Then I heard footsteps close at hand. It was Joe who came to the foot of the grave and looked down at me.

"Almost done?" he asked.

"Practically finished," I answered. "Just these corners to square out."

"I'll wait till you come up," he said. "I want to speak with you."

When presently I climbed out he was sitting on the wall of the little enclosure. I made my heaps neat, laid over them the evergreen branches that I had brought, and concealed my shovel under these. Then Joe and I slowly walked homeward together.

He told me that since early yesterday he had been occupied with Stidger's affairs. The man

had been buried in Athol. He had left no will, and, except for a few sticks of furniture and the little money in his pocket, no property. His money had not even paid for the funeral.

"Well," I said, "it would have been hypocritical of me to go to his funeral, I despised him so. But I'll pay those expenses."

"They are paid," said Joe. "I hated him less than you. Sometimes I was even sorry for him. So, if you please, I'll be his heir."

His spirit was finer than mine. And not to insult the dead man by paying for his funeral in a spirit of contempt, I yielded.

"I have advertised that bills against him are to be sent to me," said Joe. "I can't stand the idea that some day Bertie might be reminded of them. And now, what is to be done with her?"

"To-day, after the funeral," said I, "she and Margery come to us, to stay as long as Margery is willing."

If I could persuade Margery, I said to myself, she would spend the rest of her life under my roof.

"You know," hesitated Joe, "that Bertie is really no relative of your cousin. Only a distant connection by marriage."

"Well?" I asked, as he fumbled for words.

"There is no reason," he managed to say, "why either of you should support her."

I was about to turn upon him indignantly, when the oddity of the thing came over me. That I should take Stidger's daughter into my house was

a thing I never could have foreseen. "Funny, isn't it?" I answered.

"So perhaps," went on Joe, "you will be willing to let me support her."

I stopped short. "You?" I demanded, completely surprised.

"You know," he explained, stopping also and deeply flushing, "that we've lived together, Bertie and I. And we're—fond of each other. So, rather than have her a burden on any one. I should like to bring her up."

Good, unselfish Joe! He stood there, embarrassed with the effort to explain himself, while I looked him over carefully. The longer I looked the redder he grew, until at last he added:

"Even if she lived here, I could pay her expenses. And when she's a little older she could go to boarding-school."

I looked further ahead. "And if," I asked, "when her schooling is finished, you might some day wish to say a word for yourself——?"

He had thought of it, too, for he cried out instantly: "No! I will never press any claim on her!"

I put my arm around his shoulder. "Dear boy, I know you weren't thinking of yourself. But if ever you should wish to, the obligation would be a barrier to you, perhaps a burden to her. Let me take care of the child."

So Bertie is now my ward. Joe has not made his request of her, for she is still too young. But mother and Margery agree that there is every reason to

hope. Meanwhile, it is a delight to watch the two together.

That day of Cousin Lon's funeral was wonderfully perfect. It seemed to bring hope into the midst of grief. The sun was not too bright, its warmth was gentle, the breeze was mild. Scarcely a dozen from the village came to the services, for Cousin Lon had few friends, and our folk are too self-respecting to come from mere curiosity. When all was over, Margery and Bertie went directly home with mother, and Joe and I drove to fetch their slender baggage. But after I had carried the trunk and suitcase up-stairs and had unharnessed, the afternoon hung heavy on my hands, for mother and Margery were unpacking, and Joe and Bertie were reading in the orchard; and though I felt a kind of half-Sunday peace, and so was unwilling to work, I was also restless, plagued by my wishes and hopes. I sat on the steps of the porch and tried to content myself. But although I had dug and filled a grave that day, so little was my spirit humbled, and so strong was my youth in me, that when at last Margery came out alone and stood at my side my heart cried out: "Now!"

"No," I corrected myself. "Not on the day of her father's funeral." But I could not help looking at her to enjoy the sight.

Margery was very sober in her black, but her mourning could not conceal the firm erectness of her graceful figure, the poise of her head, the curling hair at temples and at nape, and the sweet com-

posure of her countenance. Yet I thought that she was troubled, and not with her own concerns, as she looked at me.

"Binney," she said, "Joe brought me from the post-office this morning a letter from Gertrude. She is in Boston. It has news for us."

I knew at once. "Colleston?"

"Yes," answered Margery with sympathy in her voice. She hesitated to say more.

"Go on," I directed, watching the dear face, and delighted with its kindness. "You are sorry for me?"

"Very sorry, Binney."

"Sit down beside me," said I. "Tell me what she says."

"I'll read," answered Margery. "I know she meant it for us both." And sitting by my side, she read to me.

"My dear Margery," the letter ran, "I want you to know how sorry I am for you just now. The death of your father was terribly shocking, and I hope you are not breaking down under the strain of it. I do so wish I were with you now, to comfort you."

She might have been, I thought grimly.

Margery read on: "As for what happened afterward, the newspapers, or the little local items which your local reporters send in for news, have told me the main facts. If only you had had a city writer there, to give the full story! But then I should be dragged into it, and you."

"A moment," I interrupted. "Were those two last words, 'and you,' written in afterward?"

Margery looked. "Yes. Interlined."

"All right," I said. "Go on."

"And so that dreadful man was proved to have killed your father, and went and killed himself. I gather that this was just after I had left, and am curious to know how it was proved. And I cannot help thinking how fortunate you are to be spared the long strain of a trial, especially considering that he accused Binney, which was, of course, preposterous.

"As for me, you saw how overcome I was by the shock. It frightened me so that I had to get away. I did not even stay in the town, but hurried for the evening train. Innocent witnesses are sometimes so hounded by reporters and the police that I cannot tell you how relieved I was to reach Boston. It was quite late when I got home, but I sent for Mr. Collester and made him promise to do everything he could, the first thing in the morning, to make things easy for you and to defend Binney. I was overjoyed when he came at breakfast time and showed me the newspaper, and assured me that neither of you could now be bothered.

"I should have written before, but these two days I have been so occupied! You know, of course, how things come about. I was so agitated, and John so sympathetic, that—well, my dear, you must always have seen that we were fond of

each other. And we are engaged. You must write and congratulate me at once, for I am very happy. And John has convinced father that he has not been doing business in quite the right way. It seems, John tells me, that, without knowing it, father has transgressed a very complicated federal statute, and there is no decent treatment to be expected in a federal court, and we are very much afraid of what will happen. But men live down these things; and there is no reason why, in a few years, father shouldn't be doing as well as ever if he can only get capital to start with."

"Which means," I interpreted, "that in the interim father is likely to be very much occupied elsewhere, in a suit of clothes supplied by Uncle Sam. Is that all?" For Margery was folding up the letter.

"All except that I must write at once, and you are to be sure to congratulate her, and she hopes to see us again before very long."

The letter interested me exceedingly; I tried to see behind it. If it didn't contain a whole novel, it held at least a short story—in two parts. Part One, giving Colleston to understand that she was ready at last. Part Two, Colleston's plain talk with father, giving him to understand that the best policy was: "Don't shoot, I'll come down." I wished, oh, how I wished, that I had seen it all!

But more than that, it seemed to me that the character analysis was here a special feature. Mr. Worthen blustering, but beaten. Colleston, with

Worthen very firm, with Gertrude very gentle, perhaps a little pitying, not thinking of himself at all. Gertrude, deciding that it was time she was settled in life, and oh, subtle, very subtle!

"Indeed?" asked Margery when I had said all these things. "But you don't seem—" She could not quite explain.

I looked her carefully over. "You aren't disappointed in me?" I asked. "Didn't expect me to tear my hair, did you?"

"Why, no," she said. She added slowly: "I did suppose—" And there she stopped entirely.

"Margery," I said, "I won't pretend a lie. There was a kind of an understanding between Gertrude and me. I was on probation. But remember, the magic words had not been said by either of us. Either of us!" I emphasized.

All she said was "Oh!" But I had been watching closely. Now, there is a moment when with any one, even with a girl on guard, the feeling of the heart peeps out at the eyes before it can be suppressed. And Margery's eyes danced. I saw them. It was for but the merest fraction of a second, but I saw them. No matter what day it was, there was now no holding back.

"Do you suppose," I asked, "that I could ever think again of a girl who deserted me as Gertrude did?"

"Binney," returned Margery bravely, "remember that at first I thought as she did."

"But only for a moment!" I cried. "Not when

I gave my word. And she? She was sure of it! And in what a panic she ran away and hurried to Boston, and sent for Colleston, to cut herself off from me before the matter should be public! Margery, can I regret her?"

She would not look at me; she did not answer. But did I not see in the down-turned face, half looking away, a gleam—? Gone! Suppressed. Yet I knew I had seen it.

"But, Margery," I said, "I didn't need to wait for that. My understanding with Gertrude was so—accidental that it—alarmed me." She looked at me quickly when I began to choose my words. Very intent she was, breathing a little fast. "Yes, I was doubtful almost from the very first. But I knew my mistake when I saw—shall I tell you what?"

"Yes!" she breathed.

"When I saw Stidger put his hand on you!"

Ah, the bright blush! The little smile that would not be suppressed, even though she looked away! The yielding of her hand to mine!

"Margery," I said, "I had been dazzled, but then I saw clearly at last. Oh, how stupid I have been for so long! But when I came to you, that afternoon, I was trying desperately to make matters clear. And now—Margery, will you have me?"

She gave me the sweet glory of her welcome.

Porches were too public: we wandered down into the woods. And straying along the cart-track we talked everything over, from the time when Ger-

trude first came among us, to that awful recent day. We discussed Colleser. If he had known of Gertrude what we did, would he have taken her? But she was a habit with him. And to his ideals, Quixotic though she might consider them, even Gertrude must submit. As for her, Boston's social citadel was now open—but would she find it dull? And would she ever truly appreciate him?

But there were more important things to be talked about. I laid down my plans. We two, Margery and I, should live with mother. The other farm must lie fallow for a while.

"Binney!" cried Margery, stopping, "is that all? Can you think of nothing better to do with the other farm? Can you plan nothing better with this one than to work yourself to death over it? Oh, my dear boy, you are as gaunt from your labor as my own father. Let us change it all!"

I saw where she was tending, but I made her explain.

"Put a tenant on the other farm," she said. "Make him keep laborers. Work both farms with him on shares. Take the risk of losing the last box. Is it worth our lives? For that is what the old buccaneer's legacy has required of the family for so long. Oh, Binney, let us put an end to the drudging loneliness that made slaves of all of us, men and women, in both our households for the last three generations. Binney, promise it!"

This was different from, and finer than, Gertrude's plea. There was no hollow ambition in it,

nor any calculation of reward, except the widening of our humanity, the deepening of our lives.

We were well within the woods now; nobody could see. My arm had ached to go about her waist—nothing could stop it now. And as I drew her to me she turned to me willingly, her arms coming, so naturally, about my neck. Then and there I made my promise and sealed it. And so the bugaboo of our hidden treasure was chased away. We had but one life to live, and would live it as easefully as we could.

"But now," I demanded, "when is this new life to begin? When will your trousseau be bought?"

"Bought?" asked Margery. "What with? Perhaps we can sell some of father's hay. Or you can get in his potatoes."

"Wait for slow pay for a September harvest," I cried, "when there is money nearer, thousands?"

She clasped her hands. "The box?"

"Come and see," I answered, and began to lead her toward the spring. As we went we spoke of the plans which her father and I had made for a reconciliation. "And the box is there!" she said when I stood her on the margin of the basin and pointed into the water. "Down in the sand! Who would ever have thought of such a hiding-place?"

"What place could be better?" I asked. "No one ever digs here. The spring never has to be cleaned, for the overflow carries away the leaves and twigs that fall into it. And now, are you will-

ing to risk wetting your sleeve by taking out the box? For no one should lift it out except its proper owner."

She bared her pretty rounded arm and dropped on her knees. "Only tell me where to feel," she said. "Here? How soft the sand is! Is it deeper than this? Binney, I don't find it."

"It is more to the right," I said. "No, to the right, dear." For her hand had moved leftward.

But her eyes shone up at me. "I have it. See!" She rinsed it in the spring, drew it to the surface, and with both hands lifted it to me. "Take it; it is very heavy. Why, Binney, what is wrong?"

For I could only stare at it. That box I had never seen before. Thicker, squarer, bigger in every way; darker, too, it was, as if the water had acted on it. But I knew it. "The Cubical!"

"No!" cried Margery, and dropped it.

But I made one scoop into the water, one plunge downward of my arm, and dragged out the other. I placed it at her feet. There lay the two boxes together.

.
People often come to the farm, to see the spring, and the little treasure-chamber in the stone wall, and the piece of pine which, with the impress in it of its oval casket, I hewed out and brought to the house. They like to marvel over a romance which to mother and Margery and me is quite commonplace. That romance is long behind us; our marvel is at the happy days that pass so gently.

Colleston, when he comes to the farm, looks mostly at the children. There are none in his home. My John, he declares, is to be educated as a lawyer, and is to enter his office. Gertrude seldom comes with her husband, and when she is here she must ride, must walk, must chatter. But Colleston sits basking in our peace, or walks slowly about with the youngest; he smiles much, says little; gives such handshakes when he comes or goes; sends such tremendous boxes at Christmas; is sure to come at apple-harvest, and helps to pack the fruit. He is very fond of my wife, and says so, and defies me to be jealous.

My favorite walk with Margery of a fine summer evening, or Sunday afternoon, is to the spring. We like to look down into it and talk of what it has seen. But when Joe is with us on his frequent visits, we keep away, lest we should disturb him and Bertie.

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